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Diego Rivera at the San Francisco Art Institute

Hilary Ellenshaw

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Hilary Ann Ellenshaw

Candidate

Art History

Department

This thesis is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication:

Approved by the Thesis Committee:



, Chairperson





**DIEGO RIVERA AT THE
SAN FRANCISCO ART INSTITUTE**

by

HILARY ANN ELLENSHAW

BACHELOR OF ARTS

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UCLA

2007

THESIS

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Requirements for the Degree of

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmothers, Mary and Bobbie.

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DIEGO RIVERA AT THE SAN FRANCISCO ART INSTITUTE

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Hilary Ann Ellenshaw

B.A., Art History, UCLA, 2007

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores ways in which the mural *The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City* at the San Francisco Art Institute by Diego Rivera (Mexico, 1886 – 1957) in 1931 potentially affects the viewer. The main question I am addressing is why did Rivera’s visual language not communicate clearly to his United States audience? Was it a misuse of icons, a misreading, or an intentional dismissal on the audiences’ part that caused the mural that is based on a Marxist philosophy of art and labor to go completely undetected in the United States press? I conclude it was the latter, that critics and journalists did not want to reveal the progressive message of the mural and instead focused on its formal aspects. The evidence provided is original research of the newspaper coverage at the time of the unveiling of the mural as well as the scholarship done on the mural since. In addition to an examination into the formal qualities of the fresco, I also look into the history of the mural and discuss the way the San Francisco Art Institute has alternately hidden and promoted it over the eight decades of its existence.

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Introduction

The mural *The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City* from 1931 by Diego Rivera demonstrates, from a Marxist perspective, that art and labor shape human history. This mural, which exists in the public sphere of an art gallery within an art school, informs the viewers that design, architecture, sculpture, fresco making, steel construction, and business practice each provides an equally important function in society. While using multiple visual languages Rivera's work communicates to a wide audience that vocation is a societal creation that contains created hierarchies. Within a Marxist framework, the mural describes a society without hierarchies and shows that it is possible in praxis. The mural is self-referential in form and content, making it a modern work. This also provides a universal and transhistorical message for the viewer, one that can be understood by many to be about many. In discussing the original reception of *The Making of a Fresco* and its history I will separate my analysis from that of others, thereby positioning myself within the current scholarship specifically on this mural by Rivera.

What I argue in this thesis is that when the mural was unveiled the press focused primarily on Rivera as a person and not on his work. The mural was not analyzed thoroughly, nor was its message discussed in a meaningful way. It was described formally and was treated as if it was decorative. Rivera was called a communist and a capitalist at the same time. While his work incited much discussion the journalists and critics did not seem to understand it. An explanation for these contradictions is the possibility that the writers were not willing or interested in discussing society in non-hierarchical terms, or understanding that art and manual labor can be perceived as equal

in social practice. This is demonstrated by the later treatment of the mural, which was covered over and ignored by many administrations of the San Francisco Art Institute, indicating they were unwilling to be associated with a controversial message. Also, perhaps they did not understand it because it was unlike anything an art audience in the United States had seen before, in form or message. It is important to understand the specific local reaction to the mural at the time.

If something is upsetting because it goes against societal norms, very often the society will try to dismiss it so that it will go away. This was done with *The Making of a Fresco* when U.S. journalists attacked Rivera's work formally as well as his personal politics, and refused to address the Marxist message in his works and his complicated relationships with his patrons. They claimed that Rivera was a puppet and propagandist. His open criticism and blatant satire in *The Making of a Fresco* is evidence that he did not support or idealize big business.

In the first chapter I discuss the formal analysis of *The Making of a Fresco*. I describe the physical experience of viewing the piece. The iconography is then broken down, describing each symbol and human figure and their historical significance. I then relate that to the Cubist visual language that Rivera is utilizing. I define Rivera's work as modern because of its self-referentiality and further explain how that creates a shifting meaning for the audience. The self-portrait that Rivera incorporates and its multiple meanings, and I argue that it can be read as a criticism of his patrons in a satirical way. In closing I argue that the mural is a Marxist treatment of the topic of labor and class.

In the second chapter I discuss the different formal analyses in the current scholarship on *The Making of a Fresco* and in doing so I place my argument in the larger

discussion of this work. I look at biographers Bertram Wolfe and Patrick Marnham as well as scholars Anthony Lee and Alicia Azuela. The latter provide evidence for the arguments regarding Rivera's treatment of the proletariat as a subject matter in his frescos. I bring up how the scholars David Craven and Anna Indych-López discussed Rivera's Cubism. I analyze the symbol of the airplane in the skyline of the mural, and other planes in Rivera's American murals, something which has not been written about extensively. I compare and identify the different planes and I conclude that they reference specific historical moments and therefore represent American ingenuity. After describing the scholarship I conclude that much of the research done on this mural is limited to an iconographic analysis or a biographical account of the artist.

In the third chapter I look at the reception that the mural receive the United States press when it was unveiled. I delve into historical accounts of the mural commission to give background concerning the reasons for the misreading presented in the media, such as the protests from local artists and the U.S. government. I lay out the generalizations and gross fabrications by journalists regarding the mural, Rivera, and his other work. Rivera's relationship with his patrons and the California community is described as well. I go into detail about each newspaper's coverage of the mural's unveiling and demonstrate how and why they misunderstood the mural as simply decorative and did not view it as a comment on labor and art. I then discuss the academic scholarship's portrayal of this unique moment in the mural's history, and place their conclusions next to mine.

In the fourth and final chapter I offer the history of the mural from its unveiling to the present day, describing how it has been rejected and accepted at different points in

time by its owner, the San Francisco Art Institute. I go over the various attempts to preserve and conserve it and the vandalism and alternations that have been done to the fresco. One of the most puzzling occurrences was the changing of a red star symbol to a hammer and sickle, which is still unexplained in scholarship, and I offer an account of its existence and a possible reason for the change. It will be demonstrated that *The Making of a Fresco* was a very polarizing work of art, despite the earlier attempts to present it as innocent décor, and that this is precisely because it was not a meaningless accident. It is describe how the mural is used today and how the Institute promotes it, and I compare this to the other murals Rivera has completed in the United States.

It is demonstrated that this singular fresco caused a dialog between itself and the viewer by using both common and uncommon visual vocabulary that was misread by its contemporaneous audience. The history of the mural's use by the San Francisco Art Institute is an example of the discourse it created.

CHAPTER ONE: Formal Analysis

Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss the physical space of the gallery and ways in which the viewer can experience it. The composition will then be broken down section by section. I will discuss Rivera's unique artistic style and explain how his deliberate choices inform the viewer of what I assert to be his main message: that manual labor and intellectual labor are related. I will use Clement Greenberg's discussion of Modernism to locate *The Making of a Fresco* in this dialog. I will discuss the visual language of the Soviet Socialist Realists and Cubism to explain how Rivera drew from these influences, and that he did not simply derive his approach from them, but instead created his own visual language. I will also offer a summary of the formal analyses that have been published thus far in the scholarship of this mural. In doing so I intend to support the thesis that *The Making of a Fresco* uses a singular visual language to create a dialog with the viewer through a Marxist concept of art and labor.

The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City (Fig. 1 and 2) at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute) in the Russian Hill neighborhood of San Francisco, California was executed by Diego Rivera and his assistants in 1931. The mural measures over 1200 square feet¹ and includes portraits of then-living figures, artists, architects, manual laborers, and others making a fresco and building a city on and between a convincingly rendered *tromp-l'oeil* scaffolding. The mural, commissioned by the San Francisco Art Association, was begun after Rivera finished private mural commissions at the San Francisco Pacific Stock Exchange and the home of Rosalie Stern. It is located in a public gallery where students of the Institute

curated rotating exhibitions, which makes it Rivera's first publically accessible mural in the United States. The space has been a student-run gallery since before Rivera created the fresco.

When approaching the SFAI campus, the viewer enters an outdoor courtyard and the gallery is accessed through the western side. The mural is on the north wall of the gallery, which creates a direct diagonal route to the mural. The building is rectangular in floor plan and has a pitched roof made of wooden beams; above the eastern main entrance to the room windows light the interior and create an atmosphere that shifts with the seasons and the time of day. A small circular window on the south wall allows light in and hits the mural on the north wall. A short staircase below the mural on the left side of the north wall leads to a door on the west wall. A second door with an arched frame is on the right side of the north wall and there is a third and smaller door underneath the staircase. The architectural elements and the shape of the wall circumscribe the composition.

Description

The fresco covers the north wall – which has a superior quality of light – completely from edge to edge and floor to ceiling. Rivera used a palette of primary colors and earth tones done in thin and noticeable brushstrokes. There are four painted vertical scaffolding supports and four horizontal levels that divide the composition into eight parts. The highest and most centrally located point of the mural I will refer to as Part One. In this section there is the head and upper torso of a male human figure; his angular face, shown in about a three quarter turn, is juxtaposed with a rounded

workman's cap that sits on his head sideways to the viewer's left. His eyes are squinting and his left eyebrow is slightly raised, his mouth is depicted by a straight dark line, his gaze straight ahead in a look of slight concern. The monumental worker is the only person who appears to be a fictional or iconic figure, and he is at the helm of the industrial production that is taking place in the composition. The rest of the figures are identified by Bertram Wolfe in his book, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*, as well by Stanton Catlin in his remarkable survey of Rivera's murals for the Detroit Institute of the Arts retrospective of 1986.²

The giant worker's head is flanked by two smaller male figures seated on the scaffolding, both holding the ends of plumb lines that are being pulled across the gray background. They are dressed the same: khaki-colored corduroys with a belt, white rolled-up long-sleeved shirts, and brown shoes.³ The figure on the right is kneeling, he is gazing at his left arm which is pointing down with his face slightly turned, revealing his profile, his right arm above his head. He is identified by Wolfe as Clifford Wight, Rivera's assistant on this mural.⁴ The figure on the left has his right arm up over his head, which covers his face and he is identified as John Viscount Hastings, another assistant.⁵ According to Patrick Marnham, Hastings was a communist, which is why he was interested in assisting Rivera.⁶ Some of the assistants and apprentices Rivera attracted were thus sympathetic to his political position.

Part Two is on the far left of the mural on the second to highest register. At the top of this part is a cityscape showing two skyscrapers against a blue cloudy sky that stretches to the ceiling. Four round metal-gray industrial ventilators are in front of the buildings next to a brick structure and behind them are thin diagonal lines that represent

structures on a rooftop. The scaffolding underneath the cityscape holds three human figures. To the left is a male wearing a brown cap, red shirt, jeans, and brown shoes. He has one leg straight and his left leg is bent as he leans over a wooden crate while he holds an instrument in his hands. Laurence P. Hurlburt has identified him as Clifford Wight sharpening a sculpting tool.⁷ Next to him is another male figure identified by Catlin as the sculptor and friend of Rivera, Ralph Stackpole.⁸ He is wearing white pants, a blue plaid long-sleeved jacket, a tan checkered collared shirt, and brown hat and glasses. His mustachioed face is identifiable, but his glasses obstruct any expression. His feet are cut off from view, he is facing right and he holds a power chisel or pneumatic drill in his hands that he is using on a large gray mass which appears to have a human nose. To the right of Stackpole and crouching next to the gray mass is another human figure, evidently male. Dressed in a similar red shirt, denim, brown shoes and hat as the figure on the left, his back is to the viewer and it is unclear what action he is performing. The similar cord he is holding, which leads to two other sections of the mural, suggests that he is also carving the sculpture along with Stackpole. Visible scaffolding supports Stackpole and the figure on the left, but there does not appear to be anything underneath the figure on the right.

The feet of Hastings from Part One hang in the upper left corner of Part Three, the section to the right of Part Two. A strip of scaffolding goes across this section horizontally. A self-portrait of Diego Rivera is shown seated in the center of Part Three dressed in a long-sleeved white shirt and blue-gray pants and black shoes. His back is to the viewer and his posterior is notably rounder and heavier than those of the others. His arms are at his side and his ankles are crossed. In his right hand is an artists' painting

brush and in his left hand is a white oval shape which seems to be a paint palette. To his right is another human figure kneeling on the same level of scaffolding and he is identified by Wolfe as assistant Matthew Barnes who is wearing purple pants, a long-sleeved tan shirt, a fedora hat and brown shoes.⁹ His back is to the viewer and we do not see his face or any body part except for his arms and hands. He is holding a white square-shaped object in his bent left hand and in his raised right hand is a gray rectangular shaped object, suggesting he is plastering the wall. Hurlburt also identifies many of the assistants, confirming the double portrayal of Wight. He says that Hastings and Wight are in the upper register. Barnes is shown in the middle, and Wight is depicted again on the lowest level.¹⁰ Wight and Hastings were Rivera's painting assistants, and Barnes did the plastering of the wall.¹¹

The background of Part Three is the torso of the large workman figure introduced in Part One, which primarily consists of the blue from the figure's coveralls. His large gloved hands are visible, and there is a red circle around a darker red star that appears on the front of a pocket left of his chest, where two yellow buttons go down the center of the shirt. On the left of Part Three is the large figure's tan gloved hand which is placed on a metal dial that is attached to vertical pipes which are connected to a large mechanical object. This is the nucleus of most of the actions in the composition, under which on the lowest level of scaffolding in this part is another seated male figure. He is wearing the same rolled up long-sleeved white shirt, belt, and khaki pants as the figures in Part One. It has been suggested that they are all the same person, Clifford Wight.¹² His empty left hand is at his side and his empty right hand is raised. He is leaning slightly to the left and his back is to the viewer so we do not see his face or any identifying characteristics. To

his right are the dangling feet of Rivera, to the right of which is the gloved left hand of the large figure that holds a lever. Ladder style steps on the scaffolding – seven on each side, one leading into the lower part – flank Part Three and lead down into Part Six.

Part Four is to the right of Part Three and stretches up to the ceiling of the building. Like Part Two, it also shows a cityscape, skyscrapers against a blue sky along with a gray propeller airplane and two human figures suspended from a line. Horizontal and vertical red steel forms dominate this portion of the composition and create a border around it. The scaffolding and the building structure are paralleling each other which may make the suggestion that the work that they support is comparable. On the left, three male figures dressed similarly to that of the large figure in overalls, tan caps and gloves, are guiding the assembly of one of the vertical steel forms, their feet cut off from the viewer by the scaffolding and the steel. On the right, three smaller figures on the steel structure create an angular triangle shape with two of them seated and one standing below them. The figure on the left is holding something that is attached to a cable that is similar to Stackpole's power chisel. Each of their faces is obscured and their identities are not given except by the tools and actions that represent their vocations.

Part Five is the bottom left section where we see more male figures engaged in manual labor. The figure on the left is standing with his back to the viewer and is wearing blue overalls, a red shirt, a tan hat, and brown shoes. The left gloved hand, which is the only one visible is placed on a lever that is connected to a furnace and to the piping which runs throughout Parts Two, Three, Five and Six. One vertical pipe in particular seems to originate from or end in the crate in Part Two. In the corner of Part Five is an open brown sack, painted in playful *trompe-l'oeil* style, which appears to hang

over the scaffolding and to come off the wall into the viewer's space. A second figure behind the first only shows his head, left arm and hand, and right hand. He is wearing a fedora hat and a light green long-sleeved shirt, his face is in profile, and he is wearing glasses that obscure his face, making his identity indeterminable. Held firmly in his left hand is a chisel that is placed on the gray mass; the large sculpture that is also being carved above in Part Two. In his right hand is a metal hammer that is pulled back prepared to strike the chisel. Between this figure and the third one on the right are a barrel and an anvil. This figure with his back to the viewer on the right is dressed in gray overalls, a tan long-sleeved shirt, brown cap and shoes, both of his hands are gloved, and a wrench is peeking out of his back pocket. His left hand is at his side and his right hand is using a mechanism that is continued into Part Six.

The three central figures in Part Six are each dressed in a suit, tie, and a hat. They are facing toward the viewer and are shown in full figure; all three were identified by Bertram Wolfe.¹³ The man on the left in the gray suit and green hat is identified as Timothy Pflueger, the architect of the Pacific Stock Exchange and member of the board of the San Francisco Art Association. Central in the group is William Gerstle, commissioner of the mural and President of the San Francisco Art Association, the administrative body of the school. On the right is Arthur Brown, Jr., architect of this building and of the original campus of the San Francisco Art Institute. Pflueger is holding a piece of paper that each of them is looking at and he is pointing towards it with his large hand. Gerstle holds a rolled up piece of paper and gazes down towards where Pflueger is pointing. He is wearing a gold ring on his middle finger. With one hand, Brown holds the other end of the paper held by Pflueger and holds a pipe to his mouth

with his other. By incorporating these men, representational space and historical space is conflated and the scene becomes ambiguous. What are the men discussing? What is the plan they are holding? These questions emerge from the mural and are left for the viewer to answer. To the right of the men is a large gear that is a part of the mechanism that unifies the mural, as well as a wooden workbench that holds jars of pigment, to their left are the dangling legs of the lower seated figure in Part Three.

Part Seven is the final section that contains figures and it is the most enclosed of all the parts due to the way the scaffolding almost completely surrounds it. On the left is a male figure identified as Michael Baltekal-Goodman, a well-known San Francisco-based architect, in a white coat and gray pants looking down at a ruler he is holding. The central figure is a woman, identified by Wolfe and Catlin as mosaic artist “Mrs. Marion Simpson,” a faculty member at the school at the time and the only female figure in the mural.¹⁴ She is wearing a white coat over a red dress, a gold necklace, and earrings, and her dark hair is pulled back. She is looking down and is very engaged in the task that she is performing, as she is standing at a wooden table with both hands placed over it with a compass in her right. There has been some debate about her identity over the years. In his book, Hurlburt identifies the woman as “Frickle” which is possibly a misspelling of the name Geraldine Colby Frickie, who was an architect.¹⁵ Catlin writes in his endnotes “Other possible identifications for this figure are Geraldine Colby or Mrs. Fricke (designer).”¹⁶ The SFAI website identifies her as Geraldine Colby Frickie.¹⁷ In his book, Anthony Lee identifies her as “Geraldine Colby... a design instructor at the CSFA.”¹⁸ In his notes he says that he gets this identification from a Sotheby’s auction catalog.¹⁹ It is also possible that she does not represent any individual specifically, but the general

concept of female artistic creativity. The figure to her right, architect Michael Baltekal-Goodman, was active in the development of the Stock Exchange mural according to Hurlburt. He helped with the architectural obstacles, as well as the Dynamic Symmetry, which is similar to the golden section, a geometric representation of the mathematical Fibonacci's sequence.²⁰ To her left is another male figure wearing glasses and a brown suit without a jacket. He is identified as Albert Barrows, another San Francisco artist. All three are shown in full body portrait except for their feet which are cut off from view by the scaffolding. Hanging on the wall of their space is blueprint paper, a t-square, and two drawing triangles.

Part Eight, the final section, contains the inscription of the mural. Only the bottom supports for the scaffolding – which is depicted as running vertically from floor to ceiling as well as horizontally – shares the space with the dedication. It is central and located at the lowest part of the wall, which makes it the most accessible part of the composition to the viewer. It is also underneath the patron and architects in Part Six. The stone plaque inscription reads:

This fresco painted by Diego Rivera in nineteen hundred and thirty one is the gift of William Lewis Gerstle during his term as president of the San Francisco Art Association for the years nineteen hundred and thirty and nineteen hundred and thirty one.

Formal Analysis

There is a synthesis of different elements of artistic composition in this mural at the San Francisco Art Institute; Rivera is using both a modernist language and a classical-based style. Paraphrasing Heinrich Wölfflin's definition, the classical form in visual art is clear through the unity of multiples, while receding in depth in a planar manner, and

being linear, and mostly in closed form.²¹ The individual elements depicted all relate to each other, but not in a strictly unified way that would be more typical of classicism.

With this mural, Rivera uses these components as a foundation for his visual language, to which he added elements from Cubism, thus making the language more sophisticated and multi-dimensional. The gradation into space is linear, though the objects are stacked on top of each other in a Cubist manner. Even as the depiction of figures and objects is orderly and tangible, and they are rendered in a “realistic” way, as Ramón Favela has pointed out, the use of space is “antirecessional”.²² Rivera uses contour line to depict volume, and keeps modeling – the contrast of shadow and light – to a minimum. The visible brushstrokes add to the stark self-awareness of the work, and bring attention to the medium. He chose to use the predetermined architectural forms, such as the stairs, the doors, and shape of the ceiling as the frame of the mural.

Rivera has filled the wall with a depiction of harmonious cooperation between different classes. While there is little interaction between the figures, there is no conflict between any of the individuals; they are all working towards the same goal of material production. However, there is spatial tension in the way the mural’s composition is broken up and divided into different groups set by the scaffolding. The space makes “no sense” in that it would not be possible in reality, but only in pictorial terms. While the artist circumscribes the composition with the industrial machinery and scaffolding, the composition does not allow the viewer’s eyes to rest and forces the viewer to look actively in order to consider its meaning, which makes the work more engaging than a strictly didactic artwork that simply illustrates images.

The framing of the composition with the mimetic scaffold both locates and dislocates the vantage point of the viewer in the space. The fresco is referring to a space that does not exist, and then goes further and refers to a space within that space that does not exist. There are at least two layers of worlds occurring: the artist-workers creating a fresco and the world within that fresco. By using this framing technique, Rivera is organizing the space and presenting it conspicuously to the viewer. As Meyer Schapiro has reminded us, the frame is a new form in art creation since the 1400s and is highly intentional.²³ By adding a frame to the composition Rivera is enhancing the three dimensional illusion. It immediately places the viewers physically outside an environment and directs their gazes inside it. There is a pictorial tension between the viewer's world and the world in which the making of a fresco is occurring. This can be seen between Parts One, Two, and Four where the scaffolding ends partway where a cement wall next to the giant worker's face is revealed. The wall disappears behind Stackpole's sculpture on the left and the red steel on the right. The color of this precarious wall is similar to the cityscape in Parts Two and Four and fades into the background, disrupting the relationship between the structures and, thus, the figures. The light color of the wall relative to the background of the other parts differentiates the plastered from the non-plastered section; therefore the giant figure is read as a mural, plaster and pigment which the other figures are painting. The mural does not stay consistent in its relationship with itself.

Rivera employs subtle but effective spatial techniques based on and inspired by Cubist practices. For Rivera, Cubism and Renaissance art were not always oppositional; rather, he was able to see some Cubist elements in the earlier period.²⁴ One such

technique employed in both styles is covering and overlapping in which the figure covering is read as being in front of the figure they are covering.²⁵ In Part Five the figure in red covers, and therefore is in front of, the figure in green. The architectural elements and the environment in *The Making of a Fresco* are rendered in accurate linear perspective because Rivera was an expert on the subject and learned perspective and the trigonometry of space from Félix Parra and José María Velasco, his teachers at the San Carlos Academy.²⁶ Another Cubist mode Rivera uses here is tilting, in which he plays with background and foreground. The scaffolding lines receding back allude to the existence of a background environment; there is very little spatial depth shown.²⁷ This is particularly visible in the center where the patrons, Rivera, and assistants are shown in front of the workman. The smaller figures are read as being in the foreground, and the giant workman is in the background. More overlapping is observed in the lower section where the machine and figures cover the legs of the workman, further emphasizing that he is behind them and farther away from the viewer.

Time is also nonlinear for the Cubist, unlike for the Renaissance artists. Rivera shows different moments simultaneously. For example, on Part Two Clifford Wight's feet are shown; however, there is no scaffolding under him to support him. Therefore, it is not explicitly stated visually if the figure exists in the tangible fresco or if he is working on the fresco within the fresco. Even the placement of the small figures next to the giant man evokes something otherworldly. If they occupy the same space, the large workman could be a giant, or Rivera and his assistants could be very small. The subjects also shift between an interior and exterior space, making the space intangible. For example, the light source for Part Four that contains the steel welders is direct and

coming from the left, whereas the light for the figures below in Part Seven is darker and appears to be inside, suggesting the light is coming from above the roof made of scaffold. This carefully executed manipulation of space and time creates a non-linear narrative in a post-Renaissance manner and encourages the viewer to look critically at the work in order to understand it. It also forces the viewer to question his or her physical relationship with the mural.

It has been pointed out that the symbol of the scaffolding here is a “literal use” of the Cubist grid.²⁸ In the early development of the Cubist style objects were broken down to their most rudimentary shapes and structures. This could be interpreted as being a metaphor for that practice. It is also possible that he was inspired by and therefore referring to Piet Mondrian’s use of grids and primary colors in his De Stijl paintings. Two examples, *Tableu No. 2/ Composition No. V* from 1914 (Fig. 3) and *Composition in Brown and Gray (Gemälde no. II / Composition no. IX / Compositie 5)* (Fig.4) from 1913, show early development of Mondrian’s grid compositions and it is possible that Rivera would have seen these two works, or works like them. Rivera lived in Paris as a young adult, and at the time he was a neighbor of Mondrian – making these works very accessible to him. Artists who run in the same circles often will collaborate intellectually and this can manifest itself formally in their work. Mondrian’s grids are based on Euclidian philosophy of basic structure and universality. By using these sorts of forms Rivera is referencing transhistorical ideas that could be understood by multiple classes.²⁹

The scaffolding grid is not only symbolic, but it is functional for the compositional space as a whole, as it divides the space between the classes and class factions, and treats them like precious objects on display. The individuals are separated

and are taking different but comparable actions. The muralists are central, above the patron and architects who allow for their work to take place. To the right are the steel workers building a structure. Underneath are architects who designed it and to the left is sculpture, another form of fine art, using steam-driven machinery. All of these groups are interconnected by the scaffolding; thus, every action influences the others, creating a sort of localized environment. By representing distinctively urban classes, architecture, industry, and art making, Rivera shows that they interrelate and are essentially interwoven in terms of their influence on making history through social participation. Because of the type of work and the clothing, it is clear that the scenes are all taking place in the twentieth century. By doing this, Rivera is also making a transhistorical statement.³⁰ What is important is the now, that is what society can change, not the past.

The subject matter of art production was quite appropriate for the primary audience of budding artists at the San Francisco Art Institute, and the mural possibly reminded them that what they do is manual labor. The gallery was originally built for and remains a space in which the students exhibit their work; the walls around the mural either for exhibit contemporary artwork or to remain blank white. The mural dominates the visual field of the room and is lit primarily by a few small windows, through which constantly-shifting sunlight highlights certain parts at different times of the day and year, and in different weather. The pitched ceiling and the window in the south wall gives the mural the appearance of a Catholic altarpiece. This is further emphasized by the division of the space, and the specific grouping of the figures could suggest an altar or similar religious imagery. However, when looked at more closely, the ambiguity of the secular

nature of the composition overrides the initial visual cues because religious works are created with a deliberate message and are dogmatic.

Eight years after the creation of *The Making of a Fresco*, the art critic Clement Greenberg published his famous 1939 article, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” in which he defined Modernism as a self-critical practice. This essay is one of the most well known on the topic, and it is helpful to understand Rivera’s work within a discussion of Greenberg’s points. Further, it is important because of its timely understanding of the subject matter. Greenberg represents contemporaneous criticism in the United States. He argues that avant-garde culture and artwork questions their own understanding of history and thus possess a “superior consciousness of history...”³¹ In creating a fresco about the creation of a fresco Rivera’s mural at SFAI – ahead of Greenberg’s observations – fits into the definition of a self-referential avant-garde, and extends beyond. Continuing with this theme, in the essay “Modernist Painting” Greenberg argued that each medium must establish itself as unique, as this is what makes it essential to the human experience.³² In the case of *The Making of a Fresco*, it is its materiality that allows it to be mediated. It presents itself as a mural, and cannot be seen otherwise. The scaffolding is presented as a *trompe l’oeil* in that it is meant to trick the eye into seeing it as a real object. Further, the presence of Rivera himself in the mural painting reminds the viewer that it is a work of art that they are seeing. Beyond the visual, the title itself calls the work a mural, making it even more self-referential, offering it several ways that the viewer is informed of what he or she is experiencing.

Greenberg’s argument that the communication of the plastic arts only occurs between the observer and the object implies a one-directional transmission and this is

where his claims become confining for artists and their productions. In contrast, Rivera demonstrates that multiple factors mediate any perception of the artwork; the viewer is a part of the broad dialog and not a passive receptor. Stuart Hall introduced a model for this dialectic in his essay “Encoding and Decoding.” Like many before him, Hall argued for the relative autonomy of the object of art so that meaning is derived from the recipient as much as from the producer – and not just from the demands of the patrons.³³ It is an open-ended flow of information, not a closed circuit as Greenberg’s writings would suggest. Forms denote message through praxis, through society using them over and over to become a stimulus for action. Rivera demonstrates this praxis by using the recognizable symbols of painters, architects, steel workers, sculptors, plasterers, and factory workers to show industrialization as a potential leveler of class hierarchies and therefore conflict. All of the labor appears to be powered by the coal furnace. The individuals are working towards one goal, without any hint of antagonism.

In discussing Modernism, Greenberg wrote

One is made aware of the flatness of their pictures before, instead of after, being made aware of what the flatness contains. Whereas one tends to see what is *in* an Old Master before seeing it as a picture, one sees a Modernist painting as a picture first.³⁴

In *The Making of a Fresco*, Rivera shifts the tension between object and viewer, and he or she is constantly negotiating whether he or she is seeing a mural, or objects represented in a mural. The sections are cohesive and independent simultaneously, which adds to the complexity of the narrative and the message. For example, Part Seven could be taken out of context of the mural entirely and stand alone as its own composition. The figures would still be read as architects creating a city plan in an interior space.

Understood in the context of the mural’s composition, they are seen as existing in an

exterior or open space on the scaffolding with the others participating in mural making or city planning. In Part Two, the sculpting figures could be conceived as being on a rooftop with the windows and railings visible above them. The scaffolding could be a part of that environment or, the scaffolding could be the divide between the fresco-world and the fresco-making world. If the sculptors are in the fresco-world, then according to the title, they are helping to build a city. And what is to be made of the workmen below in Part Five in relation to the sculptors? They are connected by the sculpture form and the wire, suggesting they exist in the same world. If the narrative is consistent, it would be assumed that they all exist in the fresco. However, the *trompe-l'oeil* bag of coal that lies over the scaffolding indicates it is in the same world as the scaffolding, and therefore not a part of the mural being made by the artist and assistants. This could be interpreted as the doorway for the viewer to enter into the fresco world.

The representation of the scaffolding is not a reliable indicator of what is the fresco-world and what is the fresco-making world. For instance, the chord for the pneumatic drill from Stackpole's hand goes right through it. The pipe for the furnace in Part Five leads to nowhere and ends at the scaffolding. These examples of both synthesis and analysis show that *The Making of a Fresco* is open to a critique by any viewer.

Even when Rivera employs common artistic devices to indicate mass and three-dimensionality he circumvents complete clarity. For example, there are discrepancies in the modeling of the figures. Returning to Part Five, the coveralls and the shoes of the workman on the left in red are flat and geometric and hardly have any change in tonality that would suggest three dimensions. The figure in the green shirt next to him has several shades of blue on his coveralls which indicates mass. Overall, the color palette that

Rivera chose is very simple and is based on the primary colors, adding a sense of verisimilitude and also a reference to the idea of universal visual language. While every object is representational and identifiable, generally speaking, nothing is rendered in heavy detail and everything is primarily defined by masses of shape and color.

The Making of a Fresco is not symmetrical; however there is an orderly division of space and a careful compositional balance. The four beams on the right are paralleled by the four vents on the left and the pattern on the buildings' windows echoes the pattern of the bolts on the red structure. All of the people are divided into groups of three: in Part Four three steel workers are placing a beam, three sit on the beam, and two hang from an airplane assumed to be flown by a third, and in Part One the giant workman is not isolated, as there are two assistants next to him. Every figure is active and engaged in a task; the only person looking into the viewer's space is the giant workman, and even he looks past the viewer. While there is an aesthetic unity within the groupings there are also differentiations. The patron and architects are separated from the other figures by two things: their prominent placement in the composition-center close to the viewer and their more formal clothing. The others are in industrial workmen's clothes. Rivera and the other artists have on dress shoes, slacks, and belts. This type of clothing informs the viewer that their tasks are conceptual or administrative, and require little to no physical exertion, making further class distinctions. At the same time, it is not likely that these men wore these clothes. Most images of Rivera working show him in overalls much like the laborers in this mural. Therefore, he is placing himself and his assistance somewhere between white and blue collar work.

Rivera's likeness is placed next to the main figure's right hand that is on the release for the pressure gauge, his rear end positioned over the men who made his work in San Francisco possible. With his prominent posterior directly over the heads of his patron and the architects of the project, Rivera is relating with his sponsor in a way that has very few parallels in public art from the twentieth century. While they take a position of authority, Rivera's humorous self-portrait questions it. They provided the means of production for the mural; however they cannot determine its message. Rivera acknowledged that this appears to be a criticism of the men, but he contended that he "meant nothing else than what it pictured."³⁵ While he was sincere in that he intended for the viewers to draw their own conclusions as to the significance of the iconography, it should also be understood that Rivera was well aware that such a witty comment would come across as facetious.

While Rivera took his work and political activism seriously he had a healthy sense of humor and it shows in much of his artwork. It is highly possible that Rivera was in fact using a visual pun that would translate into language. We can compare this image of his rear end to other images of satire, for example, *Ni Mas Ni Menos* plate 41 in Francisco de Goya's well known series works entitled *Los Caprichos* (in English translated to "the whims"). This print from 1799 shows a monkey artist painting a portrait of a donkey, or jackass (Fig. 5).³⁶ In this sense, Goya was directly comparing certain art patrons to "asses" and comparing artists to monkeys trained to perform an easy task to please the patron's simple taste. Another master of satire, John Heartfield's photomontage from 1929 *A Berlin saying: "A..... mit Ohren"* (Ass with Ears), is also criticizing authority (Fig. 6).³⁷ Heartfield is known for publically calling out the Fascist

German government, which was extremely dangerous. This work in particular is an attack on art patrons as it is using the common pun of “ass” and “jackass.” While it is a part of a long history in art, Rivera’s satiric treatment of his commissioners is quite bold for twentieth-century standards. And it is particularly remarkable considering that it was not objected to by the patrons themselves, making it successful.

Adding to the tradition of self-portraits in commissioned works of art, Rivera inserted himself in other works in unique and telling ways. In 1932 in the Detroit Institute of Arts mural he showed himself as a factory worker and in his 1926 cycle at the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* in Mexico City he depicted himself as an architect alongside muralists. Rivera not only describes the correlation of physical labor and artistry, but shows himself as artist-laborer and places himself directly into the dialog. By using real people to show different forms of manual labor, Rivera makes the discussion about labor less abstract.

The individuals represented in the mural indicate meaning simply because Rivera chose to portray them. The architect Timothy Pflueger, seen on the left in Part Six, was well-known in his time. A devastating earthquake and fire destroyed most of the city of San Francisco in 1906. Years later there was a campaign to rebuild the city with both governmental and private funds, of which Pflueger was a part. The 1910s and ‘20s brought about Art Deco skyscrapers and this style became a San Francisco trademark. Though his own approach is minimalist and austere, Pflueger commissioned artists to add to the structures. When he was designing the Pacific Stock Exchange building he hired Stackpole to decorate its facades. He maintained close relationships with the artists in the Bay Area, especially those with whom he collaborated. Stackpole recalled, “Oh [his]

palette was steel, concrete, stone, granite... wood, glass, pipe, wire. The new element was the visual arts. Tim used them... [and] the building program... went to the visual arts.”³⁸ Fine art and engineering were conflated for Pflueger and his assembled team.

Ralph Stackpole recounted that when Pflueger was designing the Stock Exchange he rallied the artistic troops and made the process a cooperative one. “... [T]he artists were in from the first. They were called in conference and assumed a responsibility and personal pride in the building.”³⁹ This was a big risk to his reputation and career, as the response to the final product would not be known until the end of the project. During the 1930s economic crash, Pflueger easily shifted his work to the public sector and worked on several government projects.⁴⁰ He and Rivera shared the philosophy that “Painting, sculpture, and architecture have benefitted by their remarriage.”⁴¹ He also observed the collective visual language that the Americas possess.⁴² Whether or not this is in response to Rivera’s work in San Francisco in these decades, or that this affinity is what drew the two men to collaborate, these shared philosophies apparently moved Rivera to include Pflueger in the mural and honor him in this way. When his design for a mosaic commission for Pflueger’s Oakland Theater was turned down, Rivera decided to include Pflueger’s portrait in *The Making of a Fresco* so that the architect knew there were no hard feelings.⁴³ This respect for difference of opinion is something that Rivera displayed often, and is proof of his inclination for discourse rather than being dogmatic in his positions. Both men were able to shift between two opposing arenas: the private and the public sector, and the political left and the right. Both also understood large complex social issues and cultural matters. Rather than merely categorizing and labeling

themselves or others Rivera and Pflueger were resourceful and used these factions for their own benefit.

The portrait of a patron in the commissioned work of art is a practice that has existed for centuries, particularly during the Italian Renaissance in frescoes in churches and cathedrals that were dedicated by the commissioner. It was also common for the artist to include a self-portrait in the work, as Rivera did here in *The Making of a Fresco*. William Gerstle, whose likeness is in the center between the two men in Part Six, was president of the San Francisco Art Association, an avid art collector, and instrumental in getting Rivera the commission. To the right of Gerstle is Arthur Brown Jr., the architect of the school's campus and of the building in which this mural was made. The representation of this architect is a reminder to the audience that what they are looking at is a building, which is also a creative and artistic expression. Furthermore, Rivera's formal decision to represent actual and contemporary subjects related the mural to current local events and also grounds it in Rivera's own version of capitalism and patronage. As scholar Alberto Hajar explained, "In no sense do any of Rivera's multiple facets contradict his true commitment to national and Latin American liberation. Even his choice to paint for imperialist North American patrons could be considered one of his astute liberation tactics."⁴⁴

Rivera incorporated both known and unknown artists in the mural, and these choices reveal his philosophy about the role of culture laborers. Ralph Stackpole, who appears in Part Two, met Rivera while he was traveling in Mexico in the 1920s to study the art movements there, which lead to Rivera's introduction to the Bay Area art circle and his eventual presence in the United States. Stackpole came from a Beaux-Arts

tradition and studied under the more traditional artists Arthur Putnam and Gottardo Piazzoni. He became a progressive artist who was a leader in the revitalization of the direct cut method of sculpting, which is concerned with use of materials.⁴⁵ This method removes pieces in order to form the shape of the natural stone. Stackpole was well known at the time of the mural's unveiling.

Albert Barrows is shown in Part Seven with fellow artist Marian Simpson and architect Michael Goodman. Barrows was knowledgeable in classical methods of art making such as division of space and the golden section. He and Rivera discussed these topics and Rivera's inclusion of Barrows in the mural can be construed as an indication of Rivera's appreciation of academic approaches to art.⁴⁶ This second triecta – the first being the architects and Gerstle – of architect, artist, and muralist shows the possible cooperation that could be achieved when industry is used in a constructive and efficient way. By using an artist like Barrows who was known for his technical skill Rivera is equating artistic technique with the sciences. The lab coats suggest that they are scientists studying the material world. The three are surrounded by instruments and tools as are the other workers in the mural – the sculptor with the drill, painters with brush, etcetera.

One aspect that should be noted about *The Making of a Fresco* is the iconographic references made to Freemasonry. This society began as a guild of stone workers in late medieval Europe. In the early history of the United States Freemasons became important to the democratic reform movement. This movement had been crucial to the French Revolution of 1789, which had some contention with the Catholic Church.⁴⁷ Rivera's politics are certainly in line with these values, as he viewed labor as a secular activity and

was a vocal critic of the Catholic Church's role in Mexican society and infrastructure. Some have written of his association with the group.⁴⁸ The Freemason symbol consists of a square and compass and both items are represented in Part Seven. This symbol also has connections to the French Revolution as it was used to represent the allegorical figure of Equality.⁴⁹ The group is also known for their use of aprons to indicate a person's status in the society. The lab coats are an insinuation of this system in which clothing communicates vocation. Rivera described the figures in *The Making of a Fresco* as "Masons,"⁵⁰ emphasizing their physical labor over those of the creative. He could have called them artisans, designers, artists, or any number of other specific professions, for they are described as such visually in the mural.

Like work by any guild, muralism necessitates collaboration. One of the many reasons for Rivera's preference for this medium is the teamwork that it requires. There are parts of the process that he did not have a direct hand in, and that were not exposed to the viewer, such as the scaffolding that is built to support the artist and assistants and the plastering of the wall, but which Rivera saw as crucial to the viewers' experience of the work. In discussing this mural in his book *Portrait of America*, Rivera states that "Scaffold is necessary pre-construction for all building."⁵¹ This is a subject he was concerned with early in his career. In a book of sketches from his 1920 trip to Italy there is a page showing a tower of scaffolding (Fig. 7).⁵² Rivera was already trying to understand the logistical side of mural making. There is evidence that Rivera's narrative of the tasks involving mural-making in *The Making of a Fresco* is literal. In unpublished drafts of her autobiography Rivera's assistant and friend Emmy Lou Packard claims that the "scaffolding in the painting coincides exactly with the structural girders of the

wall.”⁵³ This is supported by the blueprints that Pflueger drew for the scaffolding (Fig. 8). Comparing the design to the wall painting shows that what is depicted in the fresco is close to being an accurate look of the construction of the work. There exists one photograph of the mural in progress in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and it shows Rivera, Gerstle, and Brown on the scaffold underneath the portraits of the latter two men.⁵⁴ It is not possible to see the construction of the scaffolding in this photograph.

Some of the compositional elements are based on an actual environment and narrative, but what is the purpose of the allegorical workman figure? Rivera describes him as a “Gigantic worker... his gaze fixed firmly forward...”⁵⁵ His presence is dominating the compositional space, however he does not have any weapons nor is he physically threatening. Though the SFAI mural addressed the United States, Rivera clearly was influenced by many factors, including his years in Russia, Italy, Spain, and France. In addition he had interchange with well-traveled artists such as Paul O’Higgins and Stackpole. Rather than strictly borrowing he was successful in fusing components from many sources.

Rivera shifts between showing the viewers the materiality of the mural and showing them the subject matter of the artwork. This inconsistency allows viewers to reconcile this tension themselves. Comparing Soviet figures to Rivera’s giant workman, his physiognomy is reduced to geometric shapes and is more like the square jawed and simple lines of Ralph Stackpole’s work in the entrance to the Pacific Stock Exchange, or the harsh contours of Paul O’Higgins’ woodcuts. His anonymity allows the viewer to relate to the figure. He is not a politician or a famous person; he represents any manual laborer who could be from almost any cultural context. Furthermore, he is not entirely

central to the composition, suggesting what he does begets anonymity as well. His lower body fades and becomes hidden by the machinery and smaller figures, making him supplementary to the rest of the narrative. The workers in the background of Part Four are also depicted loosely and are free of heavy detail. They are curved, exaggerated, and cartoonlike. This may be partly an attempt at atmospheric perspective, but it also makes the figures more animated and adds to the capriciousness of the work, making it more engaging. The Soviet paintings depict current times as being shaped by one individual. Rivera is discussing a state that is possible, not a determining history. As David Craven wrote

Rivera's public murals from 1923 through 1935 are marked by a different type of historical density, but one that is equally far from the pieties of Stalin's 'socialist realism.' The cause championed by Rivera was, in fact, mostly about a revolutionary transformation that had yet to emerge definitively...⁵⁶

Industrial forms serve aesthetic purposes for Rivera's work. For example, the ventilators in Part Two reference those on the SFAI building.⁵⁷ This symbol appears in Rivera's later work in Mexico, including his cycle *The History of Mexico* at the National Palace appearing next to the portrait of Karl Marx, under his arm in the section entitled *Today and Tomorrow* (Fig. 9). Like *The Making of a Fresco*, this mural cycle at the National Palace is a demonstration of the potential of industry and commerce to be socially conscious and beneficial. As Alicia Azuela stated, Rivera saw "... the machine as both an aesthetic object and a generating force in the process of social change."⁵⁸ His tying together of industry, manual labor, and art-making provokes a questioning of social attitudes towards such actions. Because the artist is a laborer and a contributor to society, he or she has the ability to transform history, which is a very Marxist notion.⁵⁹

However, the visual language in the mural is not explicitly Communist. It is its ambiguity that makes it acceptable for either a politically apathetic or a conservative audience. As we will see, at the time of its unveiling it was often read as being nothing more than a message of sympathy and praise for the American laborer.

Karl Marx gave us the understanding that the problem with current industrial labor is that the worker is abstracted from his work. In *Capital* Marx declares that the worker is the “living” factor in capital.⁶⁰ Alienated labor mystifies capital for society, particularly the worker. The individuals on the factory line do not have an understanding of the end product. Rather, they are only concerned with what highly specialized task they have in front of them. The capitalist economic system as defined here is what creates classes and eventually leads to class struggle. An alternative system is an egalitarian one. One that I posit Rivera has suggested is possible in *The Making of Fresco*. If factories were owned and run as cooperatives where power was shared and not hegemonic, then society would be rid of class struggle and we would have the end of future making as defined by Marx.

This concept of seeing a work all the way through and there being no hierarchy involved in a production process may be applied to the engineer or architect as much as it can be applied to the laborers who build their designs. Another method of praxis is described much later by Jean-Paul Sartre who explained that, “Social productions are relations and have material productive forces which make real superstructures.”⁶¹ Meaning that the aftereffects of seemingly abstract concepts are tangible and can be observed in different forms of communication, like the arts. As Sartre points out, class self-consciousness is what brings about change. Sartre is helpful here as an alternative

interpretation of Marxism because his thoughts parallel the way in which Rivera is suggesting art students' have a role in future making, helping to make them self-aware. There is no individual supervising or leading the manual labor in *The Making of a Fresco*, and therefore, everyone is assumed to have equal part in the end product and society.

There are some traditional or orthodox Marxists who have argued that social influence moves from the top classes downward, such as the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci. In his extensive writings on sociopolitical thought and history entitled *The Prison Notebooks* from the late 1930s, he describes the hegemony of contemporary states. In it he argues that the actions, including education, of the peasant masses are dependent upon the intellectuals.⁶² This is a Marxist thought because Marx argued that the intellectuals are the ones with the power to change the quality of life for the lower socioeconomic classes and bring about a revolution. In *The Making of a Fresco*, Rivera is presenting artists as equals of or as members of the working class, thereby giving agency to both artists and the laborers, which gives an alternative to Gramsci's orthodox observations. Within the field of art, Rivera is offering his own interpretation of Marx. In his overall body of work Marx changed his own assertions over time due to the fact that he was continually reworking his ideas, and what is presented here with Sartre is one version of Marx that has been important for philosophy and other fields. Rivera was not a philosopher but he was an artist working from his own Marxist perspective. Here he used this fresco to express his worldview within the context of art making and city building and to offer others the opportunity to think critically about what he created and his approach to art and life.

CHAPTER TWO: Existing Scholarship on the Mural

Regarding the formal analysis of *The Making of a Fresco*, much has been written concerning the formal analysis of the mural. Most of the literature discusses it in context of Rivera's other works, while a small amount deals with the mural by itself. In the very thorough retrospective catalog of Rivera's work for the Detroit Institute of the Arts from 1986, Stanton Catlin provides a brief summary of the mural's content and cites Bertram Wolfe for most of the facts and identifications. The brief summary is helpful but contains some claims that are debatable. For instance, Catlin refers to the scaffolding as "stilts."⁶³ This removes its functionality and understanding as being a part of the production process. He also describes the mural's topic as being a "modern construction from the viewpoint of an art student."⁶⁴ This limits the concept of the intended demographic, as there is no evidence that suggests that the only viewers of this mural would be art students. The giant worker is described as a "helmeted engineer-worker".⁶⁵ This is not completely convincing; it can be read that the workman is wearing a cap, not a helmet. The hat does not go all the way around his head, as sits on the figure's head tilted. Further, the steel workers next to him in Part Four are donning very similar headgear, which are clearly caps. Catlin also describes symbolism in the mural that is not there when he claims that the arrow on the gauge is pointing to red. He explains that is a reference to communism.

The portents of social revolution in this, Rivera's second major mural in the United States, are *sotto voce*. On the blue denim pocket of the giant worker-engineer is a tiny hammer and sickle, and in the bottommost central section, next to the piston pump, is a pressure gauge, the warning

arrow of which is close to the red mark, an obvious if inconspicuous reference to a revolutionary denouement.⁶⁶

There is no such red section on the gauge. Another example is that Catlin claims the red circle at the main workman's pocket contains a hammer and sickle. Rivera originally painted a red star in the circle in 1931 and it was later covered by the hammer sickle image during an act of vandalism and was not corrected until a restoration in the 1990s, after the mural census was written. This is discussed in more detail in chapter four.

Catlin focuses on ways in which the mural is influenced by the Renaissance frescoes of Cimabue and Giotto.⁶⁷ He cites the division of the composition as similar to a triptych. Catlin also attributes the use of a vanishing point as being influenced by this era, as is the portraits of the donors. While this is all true, the significance of this influence is discussed a great deal and other influences, such as Rivera's work in Cubist developments, are not mentioned.

Rivera's biographer Bertram Wolfe discusses the commissions in San Francisco and *The Making of a Fresco* briefly in his book *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*. Formally, he discusses the self-portrait in context with two others: one sketch in pencil from 1918 as a young man in Paris, and the one in the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* mural in 1926 where he shows himself as an architect.⁶⁸ In both Rivera is a common man, a worker. In contrast to what some have said of the figures in *The Making of a Fresco*, Wolfe describes them as living in and out of their space. They relate to each other as well as the viewer simultaneously, and in a self-conscious way.

...his figures are always engaged in living within the depicted sphere of activity of which they are a part that, no self-conscious glance ever strays with false theatricality across the footlights. No

figure ever gives one the feeling of being posed in a studio, but rather of being in the midst of the life within the painting.⁶⁹

Therefore, the piece and its characters interact with the viewer in a way that is unfamiliar to this audience.

In another biography on Rivera, *Dreaming With His Eyes Open: A Life of Diego Rivera*, Patrick Marnham discusses *The Making of a Fresco* very briefly and with very little to back up his analyses. He claims that Rivera painted the mural as “intended primarily as an incentive for students.”⁷⁰ As will be argued later, this was not Rivera’s intent, nor was it the result of the mural’s use. Marnham also makes the unsubstantiated claim that the work was done “practically without political references.”⁷¹ While there is no overt political figure nor does the narrative contain direct political action, to claim that the mural is devoid of politics all together is assumptive. His misunderstanding of the mural is shown also by his complete dismissal of the self-portrait. Marnham explains that Rivera has, “his back to the room, absorbed in the work at hand.”⁷² This would suggest that Rivera is behaving passively and is not interacting with the audience. Considering the controversy this portrait caused, I argue that this is not accurate.

In his book, *Diego Rivera as Epic Modernist*, David Craven goes more in depth into Rivera’s influences, and names not only the Renaissance and Baroque eras, but also Cubist and Soviet works as well.⁷³ In terms of the message of the mural, David Craven argues that what Rivera was attempting was to show the “positive potential inherent in capitalism” and not just its faults.⁷⁴ This is in defense of the attacks on Rivera from others claiming that he was against capitalism en toto, rather than being a historical precondition for socialism. One of the most beneficial parts of Craven’s analysis of the mural is his highlighting of Alicia Azuela’s piece in the Mural Census.⁷⁵ He praises it for

its accuracy and fresh look at Rivera's political art, specifically, the way in which she defines Rivera's pro-industry stance.

In her essay, "Rivera and the Concept of Proletarian Art," Azuela backs up her arguments that Rivera's message in this mural was a new take on class-based artwork.

By representing art as a form of work, the composition embodies several crucial points in the Marxist aesthetic: (1) art plays a fundamental role in the creation of the new workers' society; (2) art is thus capable of helping to transform history; and (3) the artist is a worker in the field of culture who labors in the public service.⁷⁶

She points out that this controversial message was delivered in a digestible way. It could almost be any workers in any place, and does not necessarily signify one nation, which is why American audiences accepted it.⁷⁷ Like other writers she also divides the work into three parts according to the vertical scaffolding. She uses this model to divide the labor into, from left: sculptors, artists and architects, and engineers.⁷⁸ However, she does not go into detail about how she developed these categories.

In order to support her argument about Rivera's stance on "proletarian art" Azuela cites some useful quotes of his. In the *Modern Monthly* in June of 1933, two years after *Making* was completed, Rivera said

...it isn't true that the artistic taste of the North American workers has been created and set by comic strips... If painters insist on creating things that are of no interest to them, then it is only natural that they won't be attracted to them... but if they paint things that concern the worker, the response will be immediate.⁷⁹

Rivera was interested not only in striking a chord with the working class, but maintaining that dialog for a long time to come. Azuela also quotes Rivera saying

...on the basis of the unity of prehistoric culture preserved faithfully in Latin America, the industrial power of the United States, the raw materials of the southern continent, and the machines

of the north, the new era will arise for humanity in which the worker, now in power, will finally bring peace to the world.⁸⁰

As Craven pointed out as well, Rivera saw the positive side in industry and technology. For him, it was who was in control that was the problem, not the machine itself.

Anna Indych-López in her article entitled “‘An Abstract Courbet’: The Cubist Spaces of Rivera’s Murals” discusses Rivera’s use of Cubism and points out that in both the *Detroit Industry* fresco and in *The Making of a Fresco* Rivera is turning the “Cubist rectilinear grid into a structural device.”⁸¹ The earliest example Indych-López gives is with the weaver figures in the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* cycle. And she also argues that “Rivera subverts the documentary nature of the mural by mediating straightforward realism through the use of Cubist space.”⁸² This is precisely what the critics did not understand when they saw *The Making of a Fresco*, as we will discuss later.

Indych-López brings up other writers’ work on Rivera’s style such as Dawn Ades, for example, who attributes his “allover” method that is used in many of his Cubist pieces to pre-Columbian influence.⁸³ She also credits Linda Downs for noting that Rivera commonly uses the same forms to tie separate scenes together. The conveyor belt in the *Detroit Industry* cycle functions in a similar way to the scaffolding and machines in *The Making of a Fresco*.⁸⁴ This can also be observed in the piping in *Mexico Today and Tomorrow* at the National Palace. The visual play of presenting a “picture within a picture” that Rivera uses to challenge the audience of *The Making of a Fresco* is used previously in the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* cycle, in the section that shows the sugar mill.⁸⁵ This is used in a specific way in *The Making of a Fresco*, however. As Indych-López points out, this contrasts with the shallow space in the composition.⁸⁶ And

thus the work is informed from multiple sources, as has been argued by other scholars as well.⁸⁷

Indych-López discusses an orthodox approach to Cubism from which Rivera broke.

Although he abandoned Cubist fragmentation, several of his murals feature compositional and spatial ambiguities, a denial of illusionistic depth, an ‘allover’ composition, and complex interlocking planes. He achieved these by employing figural and spatial compression, tilted space, multiple perspectives, stacking, and scaffolding, all of which are formal strategies characteristic of Cubism.⁸⁸

Rivera did not leave Cubism completely but continued to apply the aesthetics in a specific and meaningful way for the rest of his career. Indych-López defines orthodox cubism as getting rid of, “traditional techniques of perspective, foreshortening, modeling, and chiaroscuro.”⁸⁹ All of these can be observed in *The Making of a Fresco*, to varying degrees. Rivera himself explains in *A Mexican Painters Notebook* that

The Cubist painter pre-creates his subject, instead of merely copying it, and it is this which links Cubism with the classical tradition. For this reason too, the Cubist painters [including Rivera] who are evolving style which apparently have departed from the principles of their earlier work are said to have abandoned Cubism, when as a matter of fact they are following the natural evolution of those principles into the final plastic stage.⁹⁰

Cubism is a philosophy, and approach to art, not simply an aesthetic style for Rivera; suggesting otherwise misses the creativity. Consistent with this, art historian Justino Fernandez described Rivera’s contribution to Cubism in the following way;

Rivera absorbed the new currents and produced works of quality. His first important contribution to contemporary art was within the movement of cubism, together with Picasso, Braque, Juan Gris, and others. Cubism carried the new vision to its most influential extreme, constructive and

basically classical. It was concerned with structures it proposed that painting be the expression of an essential geometrical structure derived from objects, vision reduced to an ideal scheme.⁹¹

Desmond Rochfort, in his book, *Mexican Muralists: Orozco Rivera Siqueiros*, discusses *Allegory* and *The Making of a Fresco*. And, like Marnham, he believes that *The Making of a Fresco* has, “No hint of political critique.”⁹² Again, this is because he is interpreting the mural literally and does not engage the subject critically. A simple understanding of the context of the creation of both murals reveals the argument to be completely misleading. Further, Rochfort also claims, as Anthony Lee does, that the human figures appear more mannequin-like than lifelike.⁹³ Rochfort also calls the mural a “utopian mirage” of abundance and prosperity.⁹⁴ This is a common criticism of Rivera’s work, particularly with his pieces that refer to the indigenous population. However, when comparing his work to that of his contemporaries, such as the non-narrative works by Maynard Dixon and Gottardo Piazzoni, it is clear that Rochfort is mistaken. Rivera is discussing a possible future, not a perfected present.

What Rochfort does determine accurately is Rivera’s stance on industry and its place in modern society. He states that Rivera believed in “both ideological positions of capitalism and revolution.”⁹⁵ Rivera did not see these two things as mutually exclusive. He was optimistic about American industry in particular.⁹⁶ Rochfort also points out the model airplane in *Allegory*, (Fig. 10) something most scholars overlook.⁹⁷ There is also a plane in *The Making of a Fresco*, and these references can be seen as a nod to a very specific American innovation (Fig. 1 and 2).

The airplane in Part Four is a silhouette, and not easy to read, but looking at two other important murals Rivera did in the United States, it is more clear what he was discussing. In the mural at the Stock Exchange, *The Allegory of California*, done just

before *The Making of a Fresco*, a young boy holds a model airplane. Ralph Stackpole's teenage son Peter was the source for the figure. Laurence Hurlburt calls it a direct reference to the, "youthful aviation industry, which originated in the Bay Area."⁹⁸ The shape of the body and nose of the plane very closely resemble pilot Charles Lindbergh's famous plane, The Spirit of St. Louis (Fig.11). Rivera would have known of this important event, and his reference to it in such a well-known part of aviation history would have been highly appropriate. It is also important to note that Lindbergh married Dwight Morrow's daughter, Anne. Morrow was the United States ambassador to Mexico from 1927 to 1930.

On the west wall of the *Detroit Industry* cycle Rivera has portrayed one side as the "peace" side, complete with dove, and the right side as the "war" side, with a bird of prey (Fig. 12 and 13). The wall includes two airplanes; one on the left is shown being built as a passenger plane, while the one on the right more closely resembles a war plane. Both look strikingly similar to the Ford Tri-motor, one of the United States' first airplanes built for commercial travel (Fig. 14). It is very appropriate for Rivera to not only acknowledge such an achievement in technology and business, but Ford was one of the major patrons of the mural commission. Again the plane in *The Making of a Fresco* is not as identifiable, but when taking into consideration these two examples that were also done in the state, *Allegory* before and *Detroit Industry* after *The Making of a Fresco*, it is arguable that he was demonstrating very specific advancements in business and technology in the United States.

Laurence Hurlburt discusses *The Making of a Fresco* in his book *The Mexican Muralists in the United States*.

These [San Francisco] murals lack the ideological programs of the Mexican work, such as the murals at Chapingo (agrarian revolution) and at Cuernavaca (the history of the Morelos state from the Conquest to the twentieth century), and present instead a pastiche of industrial motifs rather than any intelligible planned subject matter.⁹⁹

This attempt to condense the work to only its iconography misses the metaphors and subtleness that Rivera was so talented at achieving. Hurlburt continues, quoting the San Francisco Art Association, saying that, “The character of the mural might have a very wide choice of subject matter – anything but of a political nature – of course suitable to an art institution.”¹⁰⁰ For Hurlburt, this would explain why the work lacked ideology. However, I argue that it is there, only executed more subtly than his work in Chapingo and the *Secretaría de Educación Pública*, and that this is precisely why it was acceptable to the audience and those who commissioned the work. Hurlburt compares *The Making of a Fresco* to the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* cycle and concludes that its political tone is more indirect and this is why it was successful in satisfying the capitalist patrons.¹⁰¹ However, this would not always be the case for Rivera.

Hurlburt continues in saying that the finished mural is more political than the preliminary sketches.¹⁰² Though he does not say why, the sketches show a theme more similar to *Allegory of California*, which is less about urban labor. He points out that the early south wall sketch is similar to the finished north wall. Hurlburt also sees the golden section in both sketches.¹⁰³ He is concerned with Rivera’s apparent lack of research on the area. “In spite of Rivera’s enthusiasm, he lacked at this time the familiarity and knowledge – say nothing of sufficient time to prepare himself adequately for painting this mural – necessary to comment meaningfully on the industrial imagery.”¹⁰⁴ He further claims that Rivera should have discussed more labor disputes that were happening, and

he cites the Wheatland Strike and Mooney-Buildings case. It would be asking a lot for Rivera to address every labor protest in the Bay Area during his stay there. Hurlburt does note some small symbols in *The Making of a Fresco* that suggest a coming revolution. Moreover, he labels the theme as being about manual labor and liberated resources.¹⁰⁵ He points out that the industrial fans are also in *Allegory*. And he claims that no relationship exists within this particular section – therefore the mural fails at unity as a whole.¹⁰⁶ This supposed distinction between this section and the rest of the mural is not supported by specifics and is presented as if it is self-evident.

In the survey text by Taschen, Andrea Kettenmann does not mention *The Making of a Fresco* at all. There is one image of it with the caption, “In Renaissance manner, Rivera here takes the opportunity to incorporate himself and his assistants into the composition as seated ‘donor figures’ portrayed below also echo the practice of Renaissance artists.”¹⁰⁷ The full title of the mural is not given. It is simply labeled as, “Making of a Fresco.”

Perhaps the most valuable analysis done on this mural is that by Anthony Lee in his book, *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco's Public Murals*. While Lee focuses mostly Rivera's influence on public art, and not *The Making of a Fresco* specifically, he provides a rich background from which to draw for the reader in an effort to understand the mural and its place in history. Lee discusses Rivera's work in California in relationship to previous murals in the area, and concludes that it offered a new use for large painting – from being simply decorative to containing meaningful content.¹⁰⁸ He argues that Rivera opened the genre of mural painting to a new demographic of artists with socially conscious messages. The murals that were

commissioned previously were decorative and more allegorical than Rivera's more conceptual works.

Formally speaking, it is the portrayal of the different classes that made *The Making a Fresco* controversial in its time and afterward. As Lee states

The figures of Rivera, his assistants, and the patrons interfered with the 'avowed' subject. Their presence split the mural into competing parts – on the one hand, the proper subject and, on the other, the one put rudely in its place. One was destabilized by the other rather than clarified by it. Rules were broken, precedents defied.¹⁰⁹

What Lee is missing is that the classes and the production of a city cannot be separated. For example, Lee says the steel workers in Part Four are intended to be more about "erecting a steel-frame structure" than they are about building a city.¹¹⁰ However, when looking at the entirety of the mural composition it is clear that all individuals are participating in mural and city building.

Some of what Lee concludes can be questioned. He describes the human figures in the mural as still and mannequin-like.¹¹¹ It can be argued that some are reserved in their posture, however the steel workers and Stackpole chiseling away at a large piece of stone are certainly not standing still. They certainly represent the idea of motion and creation, and therefore are intended to be iconic rather than realistically portrayed. Icons do not need life and vibrancy to have value. Lee also claims that overall the piece did not cohere.¹¹² One interpretation of Lee's reading would be that the world does seem to fall apart when the viewer investigates it more closely, trying to determine how each part relates to the other. While the separate spaces as dictated by the scaffold are able to be read individually, each adds meaning to another. This process can be observed in Rivera's preplanning in the proposed sketches for both the north and south walls.

Perhaps what Lee is alluding to is that the piece falls apart realistically as the viewer analyses it. Comparing the finished mural on the north wall with the sketch for the south wall, it is clear that the concept of the scaffold as a grid came later, as it is just shown as a single beam in the sketch.¹¹³ As Lee observed, this feature that both brings together and separates the different sections helps establish the back and forth relationship with the viewer and the mural.

The mural's dispersing energies make studying it an exercise in continual focusing and refocusing, in shifting one's attentive gaze this way and that, following some leads, abandoning others, picking up threads of association only to discard them, searching for patterns and finding curious and compelling oddities but always pushing on.¹¹⁴

Another aspect that Rivera changed in the final product is the visible difference between the "real" world of the mural painters and the "mural" world which shows the subject of that mural. The shift between perceived real and the painted is exaggerated further in the final product when compared to the sketches.¹¹⁵ Lee maintains that the way in which the giant workman figure disappears behind the scaffolding turns him into decoration.¹¹⁶ He becomes less a part of the narrative when he is blended in visually with the background forms. This is a possible reading, but he is distinguishable as not being an inanimate object the way his torso looms over the composition and is perceived to be in the viewers' space. The workman being read as purely physical is not consistent with the concept of the importance of the labor and the worker. Lee also points out that the final product is less symmetrical than the sketch.¹¹⁷ This would suggest that the final work that we see today is to be read as multiples linked in a succinct way.

This singular work incorporates many different styles by using different visual languages simultaneously.¹¹⁸ This, combined with the complicated subject of class means that the work is not easy to discern. Therefore, many analysts could not penetrate the message and resorted to stereotypes, gimmicks, or plain apathy, as we will see in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: Reception

The reception of Rivera and his work by the public was divided, and the voices on both sides of the debate were ardent. There were protests from the local community of artists before Rivera entered the country, most of which had to do with his association with communism and his anti-capitalist views. The press covered these aspects of Rivera thoroughly; at the same time the mural itself was not a topic of controversy. It was not described in any detail, nor was the message of the piece even close to being exhausted. Two separate articles describe Arthur Brown's wife's disapproval of how he is shown wearing his hat askew. This is typical of the sort of treatment the work received in the press. The criticism of the artist began before Rivera arrived and lasted well after his departure from the country. In this chapter I will discuss the reception of the mural in the United States press and elsewhere, citing specific newspaper articles. I will also recount how the commission happened and the relationship Rivera had with his patrons. I will detail the issues that artists raised over the hiring of Rivera, as well as the U.S. government's attempt to keep him out of the country. I will analyze the cursory descriptions in the press and how they were not what Rivera intended. The contemporary scholarship in academic circles surrounding this topic will be summarized.

The conversation of the possibility of Rivera's California commissions began when Ralph Stackpole introduced William Gerstle to Rivera's work after several trips to Mexico. Stackpole gave Gerstle a painting of Rivera's in 1926, shortly after which Gerstle secured a small wall at the California of Fine Arts, now the San Francisco Art Institute, for Rivera's commission. However, it was not until Pflueger offered him a wall

at the Stock Exchange in 1930 that the details of Rivera's trip to the United States were finalized.¹¹⁹ Rivera's visa was initially denied and the trip was almost called off entirely, at which time Gerstle consulted Albert Bender, an insurance broker and art collector who was able to use his connections to secure the visa. Bender asked James Phelan, a friend and U.S. Senator to assist in obtaining the visa's approval before Rivera's arrival. In an attempt to acquire a visa, Phelan contacted the Secretary of Labor to who advised Gerstle and Bender to contact the State Department.¹²⁰ The San Francisco Art Association telegraphed Phelan that, "Should [Rivera] hold [anti-American] views as accused the best way to cure them is to let him see how misinformed he is on American conditions."¹²¹ One week later, Phelan's office notified the SFAA that the Secretary of State had given permission for Rivera to receive a visa when he arrived.¹²² Though there was initial resistance, Rivera and his cohorts knew how to locate and utilize those individuals within the system for their benefit. While the U.S. government eventually gave Rivera permission to enter, it nonetheless brings up the question: Why would the United States government feel that the presence of an artist would be a threat to national interests? Because he was dangerous to those that he threatened.

Rivera began discussing coming to California for professional reasons in a letter from 1926 where he referenced works being sold by Bender and "...the possibility of exhibitions in the Fine Arts School or in the Museum."¹²³ Meanwhile, Bender had been corresponding with many of his friends, promoting Rivera and arranging for him to sell his work directly to U.S. collectors. For example, Rivera's *The Flower Vendor* of 1935, donated by Albert Bender, is one of the most prized works of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art collection. A letter from Bender to Rivera's friend and fellow artist, Paul

O'Higgins, mentions a sale in which Bender was "eager to get as much money for Diego as possible."¹²⁴ In a letter to Rivera's wife, Guadalupe Marin, Bender writes, "It has been a great privilege to me to help the sale of these pictures for your good husband and yourself. I have been waiting from day to day in the hope that he would return from Russia that we might receive him with the honor and ceremony due to his distinguished position as an artist and his character as a man."¹²⁵ Bender reiterates, "All the artists and lovers of art are looking forward to greeting you."¹²⁶ After receiving little word from the engrossed Rivera, Bender informs him that he has a potential buyer, a friend in New York who would be interested in his work.¹²⁷ He also asks Rivera to "... let me know ahead of time when you plan to arrive, so that I can arrange to be on hand to do my share in giving you a royal welcome."¹²⁸ As well as being a genuine fan, Bender believed that Rivera's presence would be good for both nations and would benefit American capital interests in the southern hemisphere.

Not everyone was as enthusiastic as Bender to greet Rivera in California. Before Rivera arrived in the United States the American media criticized him ruthlessly for his political leanings and for his technical skills as a painter. In popular San Francisco art journal *The Argus*, frequent contributor Rudolf Hess wrote one of the most scathing profiles in which he describes how he visited Mexico and "dressed as a native" in order to fit into the "depressing" country. Because of Hess's pre-established bias and unfavorable view of the country, his description of Rivera's mural cycle at the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* in Mexico City is not very helpful in creating an unflattering image of Rivera as an artist. He felt that because Mexico was in such despair Rivera's characterization, particularly of the natives, was romanticized. "If they are meant to

represent Mexico, it is not the country that I traversed. They depict an idealized country that is peopled with types of natives that one seldom, if ever, meets.” According to Hess, if he did not see certain classes himself as a tourist, then they did not exist. He also discounts the mural cycle as simply being about the native population, and does not consider that it could be a conversation with an audience of native Mexicans, which further points to Hess’s limited viewpoint that he, an educated and wealthy man, is the only possible audience for the artwork. Alternative interpretations from other classes or nationalities are not considered. The particular work that Hess is describing is important for the history of the mural renaissance in Mexico that was occurring directly after the Revolution, which was a part of a resurgence of education. This cycle at the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* building was funded by the government and shows labor, science, and popular celebrations in Mexico from a revolutionary perspective, much like *The Making of a Fresco*.

Hess continues, “Rivera’s paintings are not, in the accepted sense, mural decorations. They are a man’s mental process. They are a diary of his development, listing its stages in chronological order.”¹²⁹ The fact that Hess expects the work to be simply decorative is telling of the sort of work he is used to critiquing. It is interesting that he would choose to criticize Rivera for expressing his artistic voice. Hess also attacks Rivera from a technical aspect and claims, “Rivera apparently decided to paint his ideas on the walls at one side of the lower court, with no preconceived plan in mind, and painted his way around it. The general subject is Industry... Whatever he may have had in mind here he failed to express.”¹³⁰ The author does not take into consideration the multiple factors that could have led him not to understand Rivera’s message. Instead, he

is quick to attack Rivera's ability to communicate artistically. *The Argus* was one of the first art magazines in the Bay Area, and it was quite conservative, relying heavily on the formal aspects of artworks for content.¹³¹ Therefore, the way in which it framed an artist had an impact on the community of patrons and artists.

One thing Hess does acknowledge is the satire Rivera utilized and the affinity the mural at the Secretary of Education has with political cartoons. He does not, however, see this as a dialog, but rather as propagandistic idealization of political conditions. He contradicts himself when he says, "I do not mean to... minimize what he has contributed to the world in painting the walls of the Ministry [of Education] Building. It is a tremendous achievement. I only feel that his wall paintings are there misplaced or wasted." Hess reveals himself to be against any sort of leftist political art when he says, "He may be a master painter, and also, a master statesman, but so long as he is both at once he is also a colossal figure of tragedy." This writer is overlooking the style and humor that Rivera is pulling from, such as the French political cartoons in the newspaper *L'assiette au Beurre*, which criticized the French government and its homogeneous class system.¹³² The bias against socially engaged art is clear and appears often in other profiles of Rivera in U.S. press.

The publication *Creative Art* was not any kinder. In an article that dubs Rivera the "Raphael of Communism" the author makes personal attacks on Rivera under the guise of praise. Furthermore, the author accuses Rivera of simultaneously being a communist and selling out to the bourgeoisie, whom he pokes fun at in his murals:

A bomb is generally round. Don Diego Rivera is nearly so. Bombs are frequently associated with Communism. Diego Rivera associated himself with Communism and idealises it in his paintings. Perhaps that is the reason why the Communist Party in Moscow has expelled him from its ranks.

Rivera is just as much of a Communist as ever, and nothing pleases him more than to assail the bourgeoisie with his brush, which can be as mordant as the chocolomo sauce of his native country.¹³³

Observable is the sensationalist tone used in presenting Rivera as a communist and the fact that he was kicked out of that party. The author harps on the idea of a supposed discrepancy in allegiance to a patron and interprets that as Rivera simply attempting to “prostitute the art.” Ultimately, the article becomes another criticism of the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* murals, a favorite topic of pundits. Like Hess, this author disapproves of the cartoon-like portrayal of the elite class.¹³⁴ At the same time, the author claims that the “Mexican Government” gave the artist “carte blanche.”

Yet the Mexican Government is very far from being Communist and, although it allows Rivera the run of his brush, and admires immensely his frescoes idealising men like late Emilio Zapata (whom it took the utmost pains to suppress after he had devastated the country in most militaristic manner), it pops up his fellow Communists into prison and recently so served one of his friends, who had secured additional publicity for his work by taking some of the photographs reproduced in these pages.¹³⁵

The writer does not explain what or whom he means by the Mexican Government and brushes over the Mexican Revolution by generalizing it. Even more absurdly, the article compares Rivera’s work to that of Frank Brangwyn, a British artist whose allegorical and fantastical style is counter to Rivera’s, let alone being empty of any social content.

Even more dissent from the art community began soon after Rivera’s trip to California was announced. Bender acknowledges these protests and he attempts to take responsibility for them in anticipation of Rivera’s fears. He wrote, “I am still looking forward to your visit to San Francisco, and am doing my best to help in removing the

labor opposition to your coming...”¹³⁶ Bender’s assurances do not work, however, and Rivera decides to stay in Mexico and delay the trip even longer. He wrote to Bender that

... it seems that the Labor Council does not concede the right to a friend of labor to realize a work of art nor to cure himself; the first no civilized nation denies to any man and the second is even conceded to men the condemned in the prisons. I do not think therefore, that the intentions of the San Francisco Labor Council are a credit to themselves or to the United States, where I may say I have a greater number of friends than in Mexico, who like yourself, are always troubling themselves on my account.”¹³⁷

This statement shines a light on Rivera’s feelings toward the commission. It was not simply a job for him; instead, he remained concerned with the integrity of his work and how it was to relate to the social setting for which it was intended.

Rivera made his position clear regarding his motivation for working in California more than once. In 1929, before his trip, he was quoted in *Creative Art* saying that he wanted to be a “workman among workmen.”¹³⁸ Consistent with this, Rivera said in a letter to Bender, “Clifford Wight has also written to me, and mentions the action taken by the Labor Council of San Francisco in protesting against my projected stay there and giving as reason for these protests, my political views. Of course, this is absurd, since all of my activities will be confined within the field of art.”¹³⁹ For Rivera, art-making was his political action. It is understandable that an anti-Rivera sentiment would be so common, in a country that at the time was afraid of German Fascism and Russian Communism at the same time. The label of anti-capitalist that Rivera gave himself was seen as a negative thing in a country that called itself a capitalist nation in practice and philosophy. However, Meyer Schapiro points out, and rightly so, that in regard to the Mexican muralists in the United States there was a “discrepancy” between the murals and

the “ideas of their patrons.”¹⁴⁰ The two agendas are not always the same, but the means to those ends can at times be similar. Rivera, Bender, and Gerstle were partners, though they sought to gain different benefits. The three men never had any public disagreements, despite their differences.

Though Rivera had some enemies upon his arrival he was greeted warmly and he and his new wife, Frida Kahlo, were feted. Ralph Stackpole hosted them and they kept busy social schedules.¹⁴¹ The Legion of Honor held a retrospective of his work and The American Institute of Architects honored him with a Fine Arts Medal.¹⁴² He spoke at the San Francisco Center of the California League of Women Voters and the San Francisco Society of Women Artists about fresco technique.¹⁴³ Bender and Gerstle were great champions of Rivera, as is observed in correspondence between the men. The patrons provided him with work and did their best to calm the controversy and secure his reputation as a positive contributor to U.S. culture. Albert Bender shows appreciation for Rivera as an artist by promoting him, and this relationship later grew to a sincere friendship in which the men and their wives exchanged many warm letters and gifts.¹⁴⁴

Like many of his colleagues Maynard Dixon, the American painter, did not approve of Rivera’s social views and claimed that they were not consistent with the work he was being hired to do. Dixon was quoted as saying that while he agreed that Rivera was a good artist his politics were not consistent with the commission at the Stock Exchange. However, when it came down to it, Dixon was only able to criticize Rivera’s philosophies and not his technique. One could argue that an opponent of American capitalism would be a dynamic choice for a stock exchange building, rather than someone

who would simply paint something praising it. And as it turned out, Rivera did not directly criticize American financial institutions in *Allegory* and stuck to a rural theme.

The stock exchange could look the world over without finding a man more inappropriate for the part than Rivera. He is a professed Communist and has publicly caricatured American financial institutions... I believe he is the greatest living artist in the world, and we would do well to have an example of his work in a public building in San Francisco. But he is not the man for the Stock Exchange Building.¹⁴⁵

It is understandable and almost expected that Dixon, whose work was turned down when he submitted a proposal for the Stock Exchange project, would not appreciate a well-known artist coming into the community from the outside. Not only were they competing for work, but Rivera's style was vastly different from Dixon's conservative traditional landscapes, which were quickly becoming passé.

Constance Maynard of the *San Francisco Examiner* wrote a series of articles claiming a large availability of other muralists besides Rivera.¹⁴⁶ These sorts of complaints came despite the fact that San Francisco's mural history is dominated by non-local artists. For instance, out of the nine total mural artists that were hired for the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exhibition only one was from San Francisco.¹⁴⁷ Local artists and dealers attacked the San Francisco Art Association as a whole for the commission and Pflueger and Gerstle personally, claiming that by hiring Rivera they did not act in the best interests of the local community. Gerstle's professional relationships and career suffered when he defended Rivera's private commission at the Stock Exchange. At the same time others argued that Rivera was progressive and anti-establishment. *The San Francisco Chronicle* and *San Francisco News* used images from the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* as evidence of his criticisms of the capitalist

bourgeoisie class.¹⁴⁸ These portions were taken out of context, not only from the work of art itself, but from the social and political situation in Mexico, which had experienced a violent revolution.

Rivera's work has constantly been an exchange between himself and his audience. The mural at SFAI was no different. He had been in the state for almost a year by the time the mural was finished, and he spent a lot of time researching California, its land, and workers, in order to produce his first mural. When *Allegory of California* was unveiled at the Pacific Stock Exchange the reviews were inconsistent with each other. The press attempted to frame the mural as ornamental, and they did not know how to treat the likeness of the tennis player Helen Wills Moody, who was the inspiration for the central figure. Her clear identity, which was used to represent the mythical concept of California, adds meaning to the work by being a portrait and not simply metaphorical. Most descriptions misread the mural as purely decorative and its allegorical elements as being transparent. Many of the critics refrained from making broad judgments altogether.¹⁴⁹ In a *San Francisco Chronicle* piece about all of the artwork in the Stock Exchange building, Rivera and *Allegory* are referred to only briefly. The journalist writes, "[T]he theme, if it amounts to anything as definite as that, of all the decorations is play and pleasure – the more serious issues are ignored."¹⁵⁰ This puts an emphasis on the decoration and does not allude to the significance of the forms or social commentary on the artist's part.

In preliminary sketches, Rivera changed the appearance and positioning of the main figure in *The Making of a Fresco*. In both the plans and the finished product, similarities between the central woman in *Allegory* and the workman in *The Making of a*

Fresco are observable. Both have stoic expressions and abstracted features that more closely resemble an object than human flesh. Rivera crowded both mythic figures with surrounding smaller figures, making their heads more like abstracted autonomous objects. In comparison to the mural, in the sketch for *Allegory* (Fig. 15), the woman's brow is more sloped and she turns her head, echoing the workman's positioning in *Making*. Also similar are the curved line in the collar of the man's shirt and the woman's necklace. The only real difference between them from an iconological standpoint is that the woman is identifiable as a famous personality, making it a portrait, whereas the workman is anonymous, and he is a slightly more ambiguous as a type.

The news release announcing the unveiling of *The Making of a Fresco* published by SFAI described the mural in the following way.

Scaffolding is used to form the sub-divisions, of which [sic] represents the various art activities, such as painting, sculpture and architecture. Also, the industrial world is portrayed in that the central figure is that of a workingman, and a great skyscraper is shown in the course of construction in the upper righthand [sic] section.¹⁵¹

Important personalities such as the president of Stanford University, Robert Eckles Swain and the Governor of California, James Rolph were invited to the reception.¹⁵² The event was intended to be an academic as well as a state government affair.

The San Francisco Art Association and the California School of Fine Arts actively promoted the official unveiling of *The Making of a Fresco* and it was well covered in both local and international papers. The articles from that time profiled Rivera's communist politics and described the mural almost exclusively as being about the various arts and the portraits of the individuals. Rivera's fame and his technical skill of working in true fresco are praised, but the conceptual content of the mural is overlooked. The Bay

Area newspapers, including local news journalists and art critics, sensationalized Rivera's personality, while the treatment of the mural by the critics was unsubstantial. In the article "Rivera Limes Industries in Great Fresco," *The San Francisco Chronicle* identifies the portraits as "real people" at their "daily tasks."¹⁵³ "Most of the figures in the fresco are real people, easily recognizable though in some instances their backs are turned. In the central group are T. L. Pflueger, architect. Gerstle represents Rivera's idea of the American capitalist, with whom the architects are in conference." In the same article the mural is described as a "cross section of the modern American city, engaged in the supreme accomplishment of this age, the building of a towering skyscraper." Rivera is described as a threat, the mural as simple.

The SFAA stood by Rivera and contributed to the kid-glove treatment the work received. In a promotional letter, California of School of Fine Arts Executive Director E. Spencer Macky describes the mural's subject as being, "symbolic of American Industry."¹⁵⁴ Macky acknowledges that, "[T]here has been a great deal of controversy about the character of this work, and the way in which it has been done. Opinion is divided pro and con. Undoubtedly all agree, however, that it is an outstanding work, and very worth of national recognition." It is not clear what Macky meant by "the way in which it was done" or to which controversy he is referring; however, what is demonstrated here is that he knew the discussion that Rivera brought on was beneficial for getting the school and association attention in the press. In document after document, both private and public, the school supported Rivera and his work.

In 1940 a retrospective of Rivera's works were exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Art and Art Association. A catalog for the show was made in a limited

edition which contains a forward by the museum's director, Grace Morley. Many of the works in the exhibition were preparatory drawings for *The Making of a Fresco*, which Morley describes as "a new period, a new experience..."¹⁵⁵ for Rivera's oeuvre. The catalog credits Bender and Gerstle with donating fifty-one pieces to the exhibition. Morley explains that the purpose of this collection is to expose students to the work. Heinz Berggruen, an art dealer and assistant director of the museum, contributed a short essay to the catalog entitled "Rivera and California." He points out that relatively speaking California's artistic history is quite young and Rivera had a large impact on it. He argues accurately that California was a portal to Rivera's future work in the United States, and that the state is the ultimate representation "of the great American melting pot."¹⁵⁶

Creative Art magazine stressed the technical elements and scaffolding in the mural. "[A] conscious structural sense and an inner evolution of design based on mathematical principles created the logical anatomy of this mural."¹⁵⁷ Rivera discusses the *tromp l'oeil* scaffolding saying, "This state of construction will last as long as the wall. Then that beauty will endure which precedes the removal of the scaffolding."

Writer Emily Joseph adds that

What is true of buildings, is true of mural and of all art. Structure must be organic. In Rivera's great mural of California we have a significant work of beauty. In it he has stated his affirmation of the relationship between art and the values of current life. He has shown his knowledge of man and nature. There is hardly a painter today whose art reveals a real friendship with nature, or an acquaintance with the vital movements of our age.

She understands the connection between the philosophy behind the mural and its technical aspects.

A later article in the same publication that came out after the mural was finished described the mural but there is an absence of any formal analysis.

In this monumental fresco, forty-five feet high and thirty-five feet wide, Rivera epitomizes the vigorous industrial activity of the United States, its massive engineering works and its substratum of Labor. The large central figure symbolizes the American Workman at the controls of industry. The mural is ingeniously divided into three vertical panels coinciding with the scaffolding required for the painting of the fresco. Diego Rivera and his assistants are painted at work. The mural is contained between borders of reinforced rustless steel which are at the points shown by the scaffolding in the painting. These coincide with the architectural girders of the building proper. Thus, if the building is later demolished the murals may be removed intact without injury.¹⁵⁸

That is the extent of the discussion of the mural. The rest of the short article discusses Rivera's work at the SFMOMA retrospective.

Much of the contemporaneous analysis was almost immaterial. For instance in the coverage of the making of the mural before the unveiling, more than one local article discussed the bowed legs of Gerstle and the position of Brown's hat. In its sensationally titled article "Diego Leaves S.F. In Furor," *The San Francisco Bulletin* states that, "[The furor] all concerns the mural he did on an inside wall at the California School of Fine Arts, depicting the arts in various phases."¹⁵⁹ The article concerns itself with the angle at which Arthur Brown Jr., prominent local architect, wears his hat, and the size of the headpiece. Though there is much to dissect visually in the mural, the writer decided to make the hat the focal point of the mural and the article. It is as if the writer feels the need to begin a controversy because he does not see one.

There is an observable pattern of this type of fixation. An article from *The San Francisco Examiner* noted the way that Gerstle's legs look slightly bowed. While Pflueger and Brown are shown slightly to the side, with no space between their parallel

legs, Gerstle's legs are shown directly, and there is noticeable space between them. The newspaper claimed that Gerstle was "a little hurt" by Rivera's depiction.¹⁶⁰ This is despite Gerstle being quoted as saying the exact opposite and praising the mural. He said, "Rivera painted me as I am... I don't know why people should go around criticizing a noble piece of art for trivial reasons." The anecdote about Mrs. Arthur Brown Jr. not approving of the position of Brown's hat in the mural is told, and again, Gerstle comes to Rivera's rescue, explaining that he repainted it when she brought it up to the artist. The phrase used in other articles, "arts in various phases" is written to describe the mural's subject and that is the extent of the formal analysis. The journalist wants to appear to be documenting, but instead inserts his or her subjective feedback to the mural and its creation which indicates not only a lack of research and investigation, but the bias the press had against socially conscious art and their preference for the decorative. This was mostly due to the fact that the local art scene was not familiar with political art.

There was significant local coverage of the official unveiling of the mural which took place on Tuesday, August 11, 1931.¹⁶¹ The event included the dedication of the mural and the exhibition of thirty-one preparatory drawings by Rivera, ten of which were purchased and donated to the school by Gerstle. *The San Francisco Chronicle* printed a photograph of Gerstle, Macky, and a woman identified as the "Princess Pignatelli of Italy" admiring a preparatory drawing of Clifford Wight whose likeness is not identified in the caption. The text of the article is even more revealing of the non-reaction of the critics. "The continuous murmur of enthusiastic praises of the fresco ranged from technical comment by the more knowing to the plain phrase, 'I like it,' by those who were pleased and cared not why."¹⁶² The article goes on to say that the audience in

attendance made comparisons between the actual people depicted and their portraits. The subject matter of the artwork is described as, “the activities of the arts and industry in America... and the pursuits of creative beauty.”¹⁶³ Like many other articles, there is no description of the composition as a whole and the reader would have little idea what the mural looked like unless they saw it in person. It is also good to keep in mind that these stories were written for local readers and not for the art scene.

The San Francisco Examiner published an article about *The Making of a Fresco* after it was unveiled to the public in which the presence of a United States sensibility in the mural is stressed, saying that Rivera has “expressed his feeling for this country” with the theme.¹⁶⁴ A quote from Rivera affirms this sentiment. “I believe that in the United States, which has reached the peak of its economic development, the moment has come for an outpouring of artistic impulse, and gradually the art center of the world will be moved from Europe to America.” Unlike most of the coverage, this article acknowledges that more than just the plastic arts are portrayed. The author explains, “These panels represent the various arts, and a *suggestion* of industry.”¹⁶⁵ Yet the author focuses on the depiction of the plastic arts and industry without explaining that they could be political references.

The national media outside California was not any more thorough. *Art Digest* wrote

For this fresco Rivera conceived the idea of epitomizing and setting forth the inspiration which he received from viewing the activities in the arts and industries of the United States. His conception was a picture representing a great scaffolding upon which artists were at work painting the figure of a symbolical American workman in the center.¹⁶⁶

The journalist read the central figure as being the only workman in the composition, and assumes him to be American without giving any evidence for either characterization.

The audience was not sure what to make of the large figure, for it was the first image of a workman in a mural for the San Francisco area.¹⁶⁷ Conventional patriotism is acceptable and is a safe way to treat such subject matter as it is difficult to argue against. Instead it can be argued that Rivera is applying a popular nationalism to all of the Americas, that is, he is representing a more accurate picture of its citizenship that is organic, and celebrating it. This is in opposition to what the papers portray as a broad official nationalism, which is a synthetic party line that is maintained by corporations and the state, who are often the same people. By showing workers building their own city, he is concerned with the potential of industry and workers to control their own destiny analogous to Mariátegui who argued that, “Western civilization is based entirely on work. Society strives to organize itself as a society of workers and producers. Therefore, work cannot be thought of as servitude; it must be given stature and dignity.”¹⁶⁸ In contrast, official nationalism – a synthetic party line that does not represent the masses – breeds hierarchy and homogeneity. Rivera deconstructs social ranking by showing members of the popular classes at work with others.

The London Studio in April 1932 also stressed the nationalism in the mural when it described the subjects.

In [the mural], Rivera sets out to represent symbolically the great mechanised industrial activities of the United States. The centre of this idea is the giant figure of an American artisan; around him are smaller panels, each typifying various phase of industrial activity – at the left, a boiler house; above it riveters working amongst industrial plant – to the right, a drafting office, typifying calculation and design, with a steel frame building and an airplane overhead.¹⁶⁹

The author reads into the portraits as well and says

Upon the rather flatter and more purely 'decorative' treatment of the artisan and the representations of his manifold activities, Rivera and his co-workers, the drafting office and the architects, stand out with a bold realism, which is enhanced by each figure being a precise portrait of an apposite San Franciscan personality. These portraits, indeed, convey not merely acute psychological renderings of personalities, but rise to the level of true types; we seem to have met them many times; they are, in fact, representative facets of the American people, and the lurking touch of gentle comicality with which Rivera has invested them brings them all the nearer to humanity and insures them against pomposity. Altogether, a decoration of which, both for its intrinsic merit and as a stimulus to thought, any school should be decidedly proud.

The journalist is correct in that the portraits act as signifiers, and therefore are not simply a nonfunctional ornament; however, there is no interpretation or description of what these signifiers mean.

When it came to Rivera as an individual, the United States press treated him as an outsider; he was depicted as unfamiliar with America and its culture and his time in Europe is highlighted frequently. A year after the unveiling of *The Making of a Fresco*, this sentiment is seen in an article entitled "Fresco Painting in Mexico." Rather than offering a critical analysis of contemporary Mexican art, Ione Robinson describes the context of the mural renaissance in simple terms.¹⁷⁰ She characterizes the time in Mexico during President Diaz's administration as a time when "all Mexico turned its eyes towards Europe for culture," and lumps Rivera's time there as a part of the same thing. She explains, "In 1907 Diego Rivera was sent to Europe on one of these scholarships for the purpose of 'learning art.' He went first to Spain... In Paris he painted Picassos... After exhausting the French, he went to Italy." Robinson treats Rivera as a passive

observer who absorbed rather than participated in the complex and thoughtful artistic movements to which he exposed himself.

Furthermore, Robinson's captions to the illustrations in the article are one dimensional. *The Making of a Fresco* is shown but not discussed, with a heading giving only its location. An illustration accompanied by a detail of the mural Rivera painted at the Stern residence (Fig. 16 and 17) says, "Summer in California might well have been the theme which inspired Diego Rivera for his charming mural fresco in the country home of Mrs. Sigmund Stern at Atherton, California, where the balmy sunshine, the mellow fruit, bring one close to the warm, glowing heart of the Golden State." The caption ignores the four farmers that are in the mural who represent labor. This article's mistake shows a lack of investigation or care for accurate representation on the part of the media.

Some of the U.S. coverage of Rivera and the murals was favorable; such as John Dos Passos' profile in *The New Masses*.¹⁷¹ Ironically, he discusses the same mural and the same features that Rudolf Hess had criticized. Dos Passos praises the murals in the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* writing such comments as the "tense earth colors that have a dull burnish to them he has drawn [sic] the bending of bodies at work, the hunch of the shoulders under picks and shovels of men going down into a mine, the strain heave of a black body bent under a block of marble..." Unlike the majority of the other writers, Dos Passos notices the commentary on class in this cycle. The author contrasts Rivera's murals to the "fruity still lifes" in New York and claims that Rivera is by far superior because of his dynamic messages.

Courvoisier, the local San Francisco framing company and gallery, published a small article in their newsletter announcing, “Rivera is Here!”¹⁷² They acknowledge the reception of Rivera and say, “Probably no event in the last few years has so stirred up the art circles of this peaceful city as Don Diego Rivera.” The company refrains from taking sides and instead expresses “... a sincere prayer of thankfulness that there is really enough art consciousness here to create an issue on a subject heretofore blandly left alone.” The publication goes on to promote Rivera’s exhibition at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor as well as the murals at the Stock Exchange and SFAI. “Balance all your observations in your mind for the purpose of making a decision, and we are willing to wager that when you are through you will have discovered that art is much more exciting than you ever dreamed it to be...” Rivera had some comrades in the art world who understood his purpose and his work.

Very little has been written on the reception of *The Making of a Fresco* at the time of its creation. In his biography, Bertram Wolfe discussed the controversy that Rivera’s presence had caused in general. For example, at the time the Mexican Communist Party, whose relationship with Rivera was in constant flux, wanted nothing to do with him and he was asked to relinquish membership before his work in California. For taking this commission they accused Rivera of being an “agent of American Imperialism.”¹⁷³ Wolfe also points out that once Rivera and Kahlo arrived in the States, they were feted.¹⁷⁴ His circle, while small, was supportive. In terms of the mural itself, Wolfe discusses the hubbub that the inclusion of Rivera’s buttocks caused. He cites an article by Kenneth Callahan in the *Town Crier* in May 21, 1932 – the mural had already been revealed for nearly a year – who called it an insult and a joke in bad taste.¹⁷⁵ While it is true that it

was done with humor, simply seeing it as a joke is dismissive, and ignores other possible readings, or even readings of the joke itself.

David Craven discusses the negative reception that Rivera received as a member of the art community. He begins by explaining that Rivera already had particular thoughts concerning the United States before he got here.¹⁷⁶ For him, it was the birth place of necessary industrial inventions; however it was also misusing its power as a capitalist empire. Craven cites Bertram Wolfe's story of Maynard Dixon giving Rivera negative press.¹⁷⁷ This shows that the sentiments for Rivera were not one dimensional and he had to face as much praise as protest. It was a career risk for Rivera to take these commissions.

In his book, Laurence Hurlburt describes the positive reception of Rivera. One article in the *Chicago Evening Post* in December 31, 1931 gave positive acclaim to the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* cycle.¹⁷⁸ According to Hurlburt, "Rivera arrived in San Francisco in early November 1930, preceded by his enormous critical acclaim."¹⁷⁹ While his formal analysis is thorough, this only tells one side of the story, and does not place the mural in an accurate context.

Anthony Lee covers the most discussed aspects of the mural, including Rivera's self-portrait in the form of his pronounced buttocks. He explains that some viewed this as Rivera defecating on his patrons and was received as highly offensive.¹⁸⁰ Lee compares this image to a figure drawn by Otis Oldfield from 1933, which is sexual and amusing, but not political. Lee contrasts the scaffolding to Siqueiros's *Workers' Meeting* of 1932 in Los Angeles. While Siqueiros' structure is just one element of the composition, Rivera's is an active participant in the mural.¹⁸¹ Lee explains that because

of the location and narrative style, *Allegory* moved the viewers. *The Making of a Fresco*, in contrast forces them to move and observe by being static, but having different foci.¹⁸² Lee criticizes Rivera for being idealistic, which is a common assessment. He asks that the reader compare the reality of the radical leftist labor in California area to Rivera's fantastical image of it and concludes that they are more similar than dissimilar.¹⁸³ Lee does not consider here that Rivera is not discussing current times; he is showing what is possible. Lee ultimately praises the mural, and argues that *The Making of a Fresco* was asking the questions about how a mural can communicate effectively and to whom in a contemporary context.¹⁸⁴

It is easy to dismiss the critics and simply call them wrong; doing so would be just as harmful to ending the conversation as their own lackluster work. Part of why it is so difficult to categorize Rivera is that he "creates theory without ever simply illustrating theory."¹⁸⁵ He does not fit into any premade molds or artistic labels; he makes new ones by making theory. In attempting to understand Rivera's perspective on art and social consciousness, we should consider the following quote from a manifesto co-written by Rivera, Leon Trotsky, and Andre Breton. They state

The communist revolution is not afraid of art. It realises that the role of the artist in a decadent capitalist society is determined by the conflict between the individual and various social forms which are hostile to him. This fact alone, in so far as he is conscious of it, makes the artist the natural ally of revolution.¹⁸⁶

Rivera is arguing that art is a tool, which can change society through awareness. This is a very Marxian concept.

While sometimes they had separate motives, Rivera and his patrons in San Francisco agreed on the means by which to reach their goals. Even though some members of the public and federal officials attempted to stifle Rivera's expression, they defended him and he was able to achieve what he set out to do in the manner in which he wanted. More often than not the critics did not understand the work and bashed it for insignificant reasons that were rarely justified. And the fact that the mural caused so much conversation is a testament to its effectiveness.

CHAPTER FOUR: History

A mural's effectiveness is always shifting because it is dependent on many different factors, one of the largest being its accessibility to the public. Rivera's mural at the SFAI has a lively eighty years of history, and the way in which it has been used by its public has changed several times. During some years the mural was covered up by the school's administration; during others it was celebrated and promoted. While it never caused riots or demonstrations, the mural was physically altered by its audience which indicates displeased reactions. Rivera wanted to have a dialog with his American viewers and to affect the public – the Bay Area community as a whole. Rivera was not interested in only one class demographic, as has been argued by some scholars, but several different social and economic classes. I use the word "affect" to mean to make an impression on the viewer, either positive or negative, that elicits a reaction. Access to *The Making of a Fresco* is ultimately controlled by the school's administrative body, and not the public. Therefore, I gauge the mural's role in society primarily by their actions. Only a few years after its completion, the mural was hidden from view because of its Marxist message. This was followed by an uncovering of the mural and a renovation of the gallery after Rivera's death in 1957. It was concealed once again before it was appreciated and studied heavily by the school, beginning in the late 80s to the present day. Now it is on full view for the public to access seven days a week. The words "conservation" and "restoration" come up in the documents from the SFAI archives and mean two different things. "Conservation" indicates an attempt to prevent further damage to the artwork, whereas "restoration" signifies an attempt to restore it to its

original state, which sometimes means physically adding material to original work. In this chapter I will discuss the history of the mural and its social uses and misuses.

Rivera was contemplating his future public and wanted to include them before production on *The Making of a Fresco* was begun, as can be seen in the documents regarding the preplanning. Even before the mural was executed its longevity was a consideration for Rivera and his associates. According to accounts from Pflueger, and as documented in later condition reports, the wall was furred in order to support the mural. This was to prevent dampness and cracks from coming through the wall and damaging the fresco. Pflueger wrote that

... the concrete was drilled for expansion bolts, to which horizontal runner bars were applied... These runner bars were wired to the expansion bolts. To these runner bars we tied the vertical metal studs at 12 inch centers. These were wired to the runner bars. The metal lath was then wired to the studs.¹⁸⁷

The purpose of this elaborate process was to keep the mural separate from the building structure, thereby extending its lifespan. The wall on which *The Making of a Fresco* is painted is removable, and, thus, not limited by or dependent upon the lifespan of the building. Notes also reveal that a great deal of thought went into the placement of the temporary scaffolding. Not only were the planks arranged so that the artist and his assistants could see the composition from a distance, but also "... it is possible for the artist to entirely remove the scaffolding from the wall for observation of his work and replace it if necessary to make any changes he may desire."¹⁸⁸ Process is very important to the artist because to him it is what ultimately determines the message of the work.

William Gerstle and the SFAA understood Rivera's worth to the San Francisco community as an artist and communicator, as can be seen by the contract and

correspondence surrounding the production of *The Making of a Fresco*. Rivera was given \$500.00 from Gerstle and \$2,500.00 from the California School of Fine Arts on June 2, 1931 for the work on *The Making of a Fresco*.¹⁸⁹ Today this would be roughly equivalent to \$45,000 for his total pay.¹⁹⁰ And considering he probably paid his assistants himself that is not a large amount of money. The contract between Rivera and Miller and Pflueger Architects shows that payment was to be paid “on completion and approval of cartoons.”¹⁹¹ This is a very short contract with very few stipulations, indicating that the patrons had much confidence in Rivera and did not seek to restrict him, despite the political controversies surrounding his employment. Deviations in the final mural from the preparatory sketches indicate that Rivera edited himself to some extent. The two early plans show that Rivera had intended to use both the south wall as well as the north, as indicated by the circular window in the plans that identify the wall.¹⁹² He was originally going to include images of rural laborers and agriculture (Fig. 18 and 19). On the right side of the south plan are farm workers. The main allegorical figure in the center on the north wall at first was going to be a woman holding harvested crops. It is not known why Rivera changed the subject. Perhaps he realized that a representation of industry’s potential to benefit society – rather than focusing on the rural, which he had done at the Stock Exchange – would be more appropriate for urban San Francisco. Rivera was interested in learning from his audience as well as communicating his views to them.

In a letter to Bertram Wolfe, Albert Bender, a heavy promoter and patron of Rivera wrote, “With all good wished to you and yours for the New Year, hoping that it will be one that will bring peace and comfort to the millions of people that today are

suffering from the cruelty, impoverishment, desolation, and anguish resulting from the misgovernment of their countries...”¹⁹³ Though he was a capitalist businessman, Bender was a socially conscious citizen. Like Rivera, his attitude towards art was to see it as a transforming force and one of social change. As indicated by his reference to the rise of fascism in Europe, Bender recognized art as a springboard for a transnational dialog. Rivera’s patrons were interested in this type of conversation and were not only interested in business transactions.

After the commissions at the Stock Exchange, but before Rivera was guaranteed the SFAI commission, Pascual Ortiz Rubio, the president of Mexico, asked him to return to Mexico to finish the monumental cycle at the *Palacio Nacional* in Mexico City that he had started years earlier. Because he wanted Rivera to stay, Gerstle wrote to the President on his behalf asking him for an extension of Rivera’s trip saying that,

We sincerely believe that the work which Rivera is doing in San Francisco and elsewhere in the United States will be not alone of the greatest cultural value, but also is important for our two countries. The splendid artistic quality of his work has here aroused great interest in Mexico and its art. To have his frescoes well known in the United States is the finest sort of propaganda for Mexico and its Government.¹⁹⁴

Gerstle saw the possibility for artwork to cross cultural boundaries, and believed that there were advantages to be made for both countries. It was not just SFAI that understood and valued Rivera’s talents. The University of California at Berkeley hired Rivera as an art studio instructor for the summer of 1931.¹⁹⁵ In a letter proposing this arrangement, they also offered him a wall for a mural. He was accepted into the artistic as well as the academic community, and both sought to benefit from discussion. Bender and Gerstle wanted Rivera’s work at SFAI to have a lasting effect on the community and

generations to come. They intended the mural to be accessible and viewed by many for as long as possible.

We can see in private correspondence that this sentiment was genuine. Bender sent Rivera a letter when he returned to Mexico after his time in California in which he expresses his personal appreciation. He wrote,

This is to greet you in Mexico to tell you how much we are your debtors in California for the wonderful work you have created for us and for future generations. No man in the world of art has done more, and it has been much of a real gift to us from your rich and rare personality. It was delightful to meet you and dear Frieda and to enjoy so much of your society. The door is always open for you to return to us and to feel that you will be rewarded by all with the Californian welcome and a large share of friendship and affection.¹⁹⁶

This shows that Rivera's work was held in high regard by some in the art community after it was finished, and most of his public defenders were sincere.

Unfortunately, this sentiment was not sustained in the Institute's administration after Gerstle and Bender's influence had faded from the San Francisco Art Association. As different administrations rose and fell, the mural was covered and uncovered many times. The first time was a few years after Rivera left the Bay Area after completing a mural for the Golden Gate International Exposition of 1940. An article in *The San Francisco Examiner* states that the mural was covered by the school's administration around 1947. The reason given is that, "Like much of Rivera's other work, the mural was attacked while it was being painted for being 'unpatriotic.' Women's clubs feared it would have a bad effect on students if it were displayed at the college and worried that the artist did not represent American ideals."¹⁹⁷ The claim that the mural is anti-American or unpatriotic is not supported by any evidence, and the mural itself is not

described. Further, the assumption that this work would have such detrimental influences on a society is unfounded, particularly when considering that the initial reception of the mural – as outlined previously – was so tame. There is an inconsistency here: Does art have a real effect or is its existence immaterial? It cannot be both at once. A dialog is not threatening because it is open-ended, but the mural was misread as propagandistic and therefore vilified.

It was not until the 1950s that the mural was treated with greater respect. In a letter to Emmy Lou Packard, Gurdon Woods, a sculptor and one-time director of the school, explains that when he arrived at the California School of Fine Arts in 1955 he found the mural was covered by a cloth that had been placed there by Douglas MacAgy, the previous director. Woods raised funds to remove the dirty cheesecloth and to have new lighting installed so that the mural would be more visible. He wrote:

The gallery was in lamentable condition and the cheese cloth [sic] cover was present and loaded with junk that had been thrown at it, dropped on it by insects and chips of paint and plaster from the ceiling... I thought of Diego as 'old master' and considered the covering to be vandalism. As soon as I could find some money I had the cloth removed, the whole room painted and the tube lighting installed. The decision met with considerable criticism – mostly supporting McCagy's [sic] position... but when any one complained to me, I would make remarks about taking their painting back to the studio and working on it some more so that it would be strong enough to hold its own.¹⁹⁸

The decision by MacAgy to put a veil over the mural was a deliberate attempt to censor Rivera. His action was based on his personal opinion that the mural was overpowering the students' work. There is no evidence that his feelings represented the school or the community at large. While he disagreed with Rivera's message and felt he had the authority to silence his voice, he was unsuccessful in doing so permanently.

After Rivera's death on November 24, 1957 the mural would be celebrated in an attempt to bring publicity to the school. Shortly after the mural was made important by Woods a program was created that funded the renovation of the gallery and the mural in the same year. According to the San Francisco Art Association newsletter, "The Board of Directors has agreed to finance the costs of renovating the Gallery and the Rivera mural; therefore this expense will not accrue to the Council as had been expected."¹⁹⁹

The San Francisco Chronicle covered this renovation. The article says:

This untitled 20-by-30 foot [this measurement is not correct] mural by Diego Rivera, who died a week ago in Mexico City, is being readied for exhibition and 'rededication' next spring at the California School of Fine Arts, 800 Chestnut street [sic]. What looks like a scaffold is really part of the mural, and Rivera painted himself into the picture. He is sitting on the scaffold, brush and palette [sic] in hand. School officials hid the painting behind a false wall and erected a temporary ceiling halfway up ten years ago. They never acknowledged their act was done for political reasons (Rivera was a Communist) but said the big mural detracted from other exhibits. Next spring, it is reported, a new lighting system will be put into effect, which can throw the mural into shadows when other works are on display.²⁰⁰

Not only is this fact completely untrue, but the claim that the mural is untitled is consistent with the agenda of the newspaper not wanting to discuss its message of labor. Although *The Chronicle* acknowledged the discrimination that Rivera received for his politics, it also participated in it. They are also creating the false threat of "communist" behavior, which was common during the Cold War and the Red Scare.

The Making of a Fresco would be censored again with no substantial reasoning, similar to previous times. Unfortunately, much of the work that was put towards the mural's revitalization and re-unveiling was undone less than ten years later, as the minutes from a 1966 Executive Committee Meeting show. The notes detail the director

of exhibitions' request of \$500 for a curtain on a track to cover the mural. This time the reasoning appeared to be logistical in nature: "The fresco over-powers shows being held in the Gallery and it was felt that a curtain on a track which could be opened and closed would solve the problem."²⁰¹ Even after his exit, it seems that Rivera was a threat to and was competition for San Francisco artists. This vacillation between praise and suppression shows that not only did the presence of Rivera's message continue to be controversial, but that the school could not decide between capitalizing on Rivera's fame or censoring his message.

A long stretch of accessibility and active use, which dictated the mural's life for decades followed Rivera's death. In a 1975 Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board report, the history of SFAI is recounted along with a description of *The Making of a Fresco* and how the commission came about, including Stackpole's trip to Mexico.

Ralph Stackpole returned from Mexico in 1926 with two pictures by Diego Rivera. William Gerstle, president of the Art Association, was very excited about the work and commissioned Rivera to do a small wall, 120 feet square, in the school. Rivera arrived in San Francisco in 1930. When he saw the original wall he said it was too small and selected the largest wall in the school without asking for more than the \$1,500 Gerstle had donated for the mural.²⁰²

Rivera's artistic influence in the Bay Area is mentioned, including his later work at the Golden Gate International Exposition in 1940.

He was again invited to do a work for the city, this time for the Golden Gate International Exposition, which was part of the Art in Action project... At this time he accepted an invitation to teach at the school but other commitments took him elsewhere.²⁰³

This affirmative characterization of Rivera and his California murals shows the esteem in which both were held by the school, and is in contrast to some of the previous treatment

the mural received. The mural did not cause students to riot nor for unions to be formed. Nothing tragic happened at the SFAI due to the mural being viewable and celebrated.

The mural would go through many cleanings and restorations. These efforts indicate that the school was invested in the mural's condition. In a condition report from 1977, Emmy Lou Packard describes the "heavy linen curtains" that Douglas MacAgy had put up: "Even when pulled to the sides they cover about 3 feet of the fresco from floor to ceiling."²⁰⁴ She identifies some surface scratches on the wall and mentions that she patched one with Liquitex and water. Packard retouched the painted wood panels, though the details of her work are not described. She says, "I decided not to retouch the lower painted scaffold 'supports' since the reality of the 'used' (scratched) painted wood (fou bois [sic]) supports might have amused Rivera. Juan O'Gorman told me he likes to see the public 'use' his murals."²⁰⁵ Rivera was interested in artwork that functioned as exchange. He did not want his work to be hidden from view for the sake of keeping it pristine. He wanted it to be handled. Packard writes that, considering its age, the mural was clean and he attributes this to the curtain. She also says that one of the doors in the gallery leads to a janitorial storage area, which would add to the living aspect of the mural. Because she was a muralist herself and was friends with Rivera, she had a personal investment in the *The Making of a Fresco*. There is no record of payment for her work.

There are different categories of worth regarding a piece of artwork. The collective and societal values of the mural have been discussed but the monetary value it has is also significant. In 1987 Herbert Hoover, a private appraiser and gallery owner, was hired by the school to appraise the mural's value for insurance purposes. Hoover put

its monetary worth at 1.5 million dollars, and recorded its condition as “excellent.”²⁰⁶ Adjusted for inflation, today that would more than three million dollars.²⁰⁷ Rivera’s fame and market value was quite substantial during this period. Eleven other murals at SFAI done for the library in 1936 by various artists including Ralph Stackpole were valued at a total of \$219,000.00, a bas-relief of about 46” by 54” by Jacques Schnier from the same year at \$85,000.00. Therefore, these murals’ values were \$107 a square foot, whereas Rivera’s is valued at \$1,250 a square foot, more than twelve times as much, a clear difference in monetary worth. Much earlier, and around the time of the commission, a telegram from Jere Abbott, the director of the Museum of Modern Art lists twenty six drawings by Rivera which were insured for a total of five thousand dollars.²⁰⁸ These works were for his solo show at the MoMA in 1931 that also included works from Gerstle’s private collection.²⁰⁹ Though inflation should be considered, this clearly shows a significant leap in the market value of original Riveras from the time of the mural’s creation and fifty years following.

In a meeting between SFAI and Ripley Associates in October of 1988 to discuss the renovation of the gallery, a budget of \$44,000 was proposed and that amount was found to be insufficient.²¹⁰ New lighting for the fresco and repairs for leaks coming in from the roof were suggested. Later, The Diego Rivera Mural Conservation Workshop sponsored by SFAI in 1992 was created by Lucienne Bloch and Stephen Pope Dimitroff, both of whom were muralists and had worked with Rivera. The workshop included instruction from two private conservationists and one from SFMOMA. The goal of the project was to assess the condition of the mural and give students the opportunity to study mural techniques in a hands-on environment.²¹¹ The condition report from the group

describes the same chemical makeup as a later report by Inge-Lise Eckmann that is described below, and adds that, according to the plaster layers, “Each giornata [a section of a fresco] defines the area to be painted that day or in one period. Generally, Rivera painted for long periods – commonly 20 hours.”²¹² The report goes on to state, “The surface texture of this mural is rougher than that of the Stock Exchange mural. This is most likely from having been applied more quickly, causing some uneven troweling and polishing of the plaster. Both are the work of Rivera’s plasterer Mathew Barnes.”²¹³ The report identifies the gouge that a later report by Eckmann notes which is located over the figure of Arthur Brown, indicating that the impact occurred before 1992 and was not fixed until 1997. There are also “Numerous human height abrasions and losses” as well as “A series of prior repairs... thought to have been caused by flying objects that were part of a gallery installation.” This indicates that much of the erosion and wear of the mural was accidental due to the high traffic in the used public space. The report also cites, “White residue (thought to be toothpaste or similar material) used in unauthorized overpainting of the star symbol hanging from the mural figure’s breast pocket. Majority of the residue was removed in a prior treatment.” This proves that the intended symbol was a star, not the hammer and sickle that was there for decades, and that the overpainting was not authorized by Rivera or the school. It also indicates that this defacement and the attempt to remove it occurred before the date of this report. People were reacting to the mural and interacting with it. There is a short addendum to the initial report, written in August, that explains that SFAI staff had installed plastic sheeting over the mural to protect it from dust from the gallery floor being sanded in July. The mural was damaged despite this effort as the plastic was not removed under professional

supervision which caused numerous gouges and abrasions. Again, the mural's placement in a public space is a hazard to its physical state. However, it is important that it remains public, as that defines its existence as a platform for dialog. The fact that the mural was defaced indicates that some disagreed with the ideology it expressed and incited an emotional reaction.

The discovery that toothpaste was what made up the hammer and sickle is worthwhile to explore. This means that the underpainting, which was a red star, is the symbol that Rivera originally intended to have hanging over the giant workman's pocket.²¹⁴ This means that someone in much later years painted the more directly communist symbol onto the mural. Because of the high tension during the Cold War in these decades, it is highly possible that a politically-minded student altered the image, particularly because the mural was hidden for so many years and not seen by the administration itself. Perhaps this was done in retaliation for the school's politics, or maybe the foreign policy of the United States. There is no way to prove who did it, but this is a very possible scenario.

In September of 1997 the mural was conserved by Inge-Lise Eckmann who cleaned off dirt and removed graffiti. Eckmann found the sentence "So what?" written on the dedication in ink and a large gauge above the figure of Arthur Brown which she patched. The graffiti shows more interaction and reaction by its viewers. It was noted that "additional conservation is still needed" because many dirty areas were sighted. The report goes on to say:

In addition the white fields between the uprights of the scaffolding have been repeatedly and unevenly repainted with white gallery wall paint. These fields would have originally been a gray tone more like the plaster color in the mural above. The high white color would have been

reserved for the painted whites in the mural; in particular Diego's palette and the white shirt of the assistant (figure #5). The overpainting of the lower field coupled with the damaged condition of the scaffold footing visually disintegrates this portion of the painting and does much to diminish the powerful effect of depth the artist intended.²¹⁵

The mural was not only vandalized and censored, but also was altered slightly. Because the color of the bottom non-figurative portion of the mural at some point was changed to a stark white, the viewer could read it as neutral wall and not a part of the narrative, which is what Rivera intended. This changes the composition and the scope of the story the mural is telling. The continuation of the scaffolding to the ground would have been enhanced and more narrative if the color surrounding it looked like the "mural" above and the textured gray that resembles the sculpture on which Stackpole is working. This would have added to the play between reality and artwork, mural and life, and would have contributed to the back and forth between the object and the subject of the work as a whole.

In the 1997 condition report, Eckmann describes the physical materiality of the mural in detail.

The mural is of the true fresco method executed on a primary support of aggregate lime plaster over a furred wall: a system of galvanized metal lath to which a plumb layer of concrete has been applied. There is airspace between the mural and the building wall. The plaster is in generally good condition exhibiting some uneven troweling and polishing as well as some incised cartooning. The paint surface is true fresco; brushstrokes of pigments ground in water and applied to wet plaster, with some pouncing method and pencil cartooning evident, and it appears to be in sound condition.²¹⁶

Eckmann goes on to cite a condition report from the Diego Rivera Mural Conservation Workshop of 1992, saying that at that time there were many gouges and paint splatters

which were untreated and that a “blow of considerable impact was received.”²¹⁷

Eckmann concludes that, “In order to properly preserve this cultural landmark a program of overall cleaning and conservation is strongly recommended. The appearance is significantly compromised by the accumulation of damages which not only detracts from the aesthetic intent but encourages a climate of disrespect.”²¹⁸ Eckmann writes that she believes these damages were caused purposefully and suggests putting up a barrier and not using the stairs or nearby doors to prevent further defacing. It is not possible to prove the motivations of those who vandalized the mural, but it seems certain that if it were a blank wall it would not have as much damage done to it.

There is no indication that the mural will be returned to a state of obscurity as the SFAI highly regards the work and Rivera’s place in history. Perhaps this is because enough time has passed and the threat of outside radical politics does not seem as important. Today, the mural is open and available to the public seven days a week. There is constantly an exhibition in the gallery and a steady flow of people go in and out each week, hundreds during an opening reception. The door on the east wall is the only functioning entrance to the space.²¹⁹ The doors closest to the mural are not in use and there is a rope from the stair railing to the east wall that is intended to keep the public away from the artwork. There is no security guarding the mural, however getting within arm’s length of the mural is clearly discouraged by the rope and signs. The Getty Conservation Institute underwrote a grant for a cleaning project about ten years ago. No work has been done on the mural since. The mural is well lit with track spotlights and appears to be in very good condition. The school proudly exhibits the mural as is demonstrated by the abundance of information about it on the website with a fifteen-

hundred word description. There is also a separate page with a lengthy summary of Rivera's biography and the commission, including his influence on other artists in San Francisco.²²⁰ A third page with more information on other Rivera works in the Bay Area has hyperlinks to other resourceful websites. In the gallery in front of the mural is a brochure with details and history. The description of the mission of the gallery is given on the SFAI website as follows

The Diego Rivera Gallery is a student-directed exhibition space for work by SFAI students. The gallery provides an opportunity for BFA, MFA and Post-Baccalaureate students to present their work in a gallery setting, to use the space for large-scale installations, or to experiment with artistic concepts and concerns in a public venue.²²¹

This is different from the other Rivera's murals in the United States. Of all of the other works he executed, the one at SFAI is the most accessible and therefore the most vulnerable to being defaced. His mural at the Pacific Stock Exchange, which is now the City Club, is a private space. The mural is in the dining room and is only accessible to paying members and their guests. A short paragraph on the website under the "History" section under "About Us" describes *Allegory of California*.²²² Equal attention is given to the other pieces of art that are a part of the building. Rivera's *Pan American Unity*, which was executed for the Golden Gate International Exposition in 1940, was a portable mural on panels. It is now in the Diego Rivera Theater at the City College of San Francisco. It is open to the public on a limited schedule that changes seasonally, and large groups are encouraged to make reservations. There is a wealth of information about the mural and its commission online provided by the Diego Rivera Mural Project, which is a part of the CCSF Rosenberg Library.²²³ The mural Rivera did for the Stern home was also moved from its original location. It is currently located at the bottom of a spiral

staircase at Stern House, an all-girls undergraduate dormitory at University of California Berkeley. It is not open to the public and is only accessible to the residents of the dorm. There is no mention of the mural on the hall's website.²²⁴ There is no signage near the painting that identifies it. The mural cycle Rivera created in Detroit in 1932 exists in Rivera Court at the Detroit Institute of Arts. Similar to SFAI, it is also open to the public every day of the week. And like SFAI and CCSF, there is an abundance of information about Rivera and the commission on the DIA website.²²⁵ Also as with the SFAI commission, the purpose of the mural was for it to be viewed by a wide audience. Its subject is also industry and labor, and includes a discussion of biology and medicine as well. Rivera was hired to create a mural in New York City's Rockefeller Center after the Detroit mural. It was destroyed before it was finished because the commissioners were concerned about the portrait of Lenin that Rivera included. Loud objections from sympathetic New York artists commenced after the destruction of the mural and the wall in an attempt to defend Rivera and his right to expression. Much scholarship has been written analyzing this mural and its story, possibly the most of any Rivera work. After the Rockefeller project in 1933, Rivera painted twenty-one moveable frescoes for the New Workers School, a union organization. The frescos discuss American history and the rise of Fascism and Nazism. The paintings are now in a private collection and are not viewable by the public. These murals discussed above are the only murals that Rivera did in the United States.

There is much literature on the history of *The Making of a Fresco*. One of the most thorough descriptions is in the Rivera biography by Bertram Wolfe. In it, he characterizes the complicated sentiments that Rivera had with the United States before

entering the country.²²⁶ According to Wolfe, while he admired the country's state of the art infrastructure, he disapproved of the corporate and military behavioral practices. He chronicles his introduction to the United States art market. According to Wolfe, Timothy Pflueger first announced that Rivera would be commissioned to do the Stock Exchange mural in September of 1930.²²⁷ However, this was not the first presentation of Rivera's work to a United States audience. In 1915, almost two decades prior, Marius de Zayas debuted one of Rivera's more aesthetically European pointillist landscapes in his Fifth Avenue gallery in New York City. And in 1925 the World's Fair in Los Angeles awarded a Rivera painting the purchase prize.²²⁸ The work was *Flower Day*, and slightly abstract depiction of native Mexicans selling calla lilies. Though, it is fair to say that he was more known for his politics and his public art in Mexico by his work seen in the United States. Wolfe points out that Rivera's political activism was controversial, as can be seen with the struggle to get his visa and protests he received before entering. At this point in the narrative Wolfe poses the question to the reader: Why is an artist treated as a threat to national security?²²⁹ He also relays the story that the president of Mexico almost shortened Rivera's stay by requesting he return to finish the National Palace mural cycle. Wolfe credits Gerstle with allowing Rivera to stay because he gave him a larger wall to work on, nearly 1,200 square feet, ten times the size of the previously delegated wall at SFAI.²³⁰

There are conflicting measurements of *The Making of a Fresco*. In his biography, Patrick Marnham, for example, puts the dimensions of *Making* at 658 square feet, which is smaller than Wolfe's 1200 square feet.²³¹ And in contrast to Wolfe's narrative, Marnham marks Rivera's first exposure to the United States when he went to New York

to take a boat to Moscow years prior.²³² While this was not a significant trip, his train to San Francisco was not the first time he experienced American culture. This cannot compare, however, to the extensive research and exploration he carried out in California while preparing for the Stock Exchange and SFAI murals. Marnham also discusses the reception from Rivera's home country, not in terms of the mural, but these commissions as a whole. He points out that even with the Mexican press, not only were his politics presented as being questionable, but the Mexican Communist Party criticized him for accepting work from American business owners.²³³ While he had been kicked out of the party by this time, he was still risking his career and political reputation when he took this work.

Marnham's analysis of this part of Rivera's life includes a significant amount of superficial gossip, such as Rivera and Kahlo's romantic relationships with others while still married. He suspects that Rivera had an affair with Helen Wills Moody while she was modeling for *Allegory of California*.²³⁴ While this may be true, it is not clear why this is important to the story or to the discussion of his work. He also points to Kahlo's ambiguous sexuality when he discusses that she may have had an affair with Cristina Hastings, John Viscount's wife, and Nicholas Murray at this time. Again, these relationships are not pertinent to an understanding of the mural or its social context. It simply makes it more interesting to outsiders and is something that both Rivera and Kahlo had to deal with during their lives as well.

Anthony Lee accounts for much of the mural's history in his book, *Painting on the Left*. He discusses Rivera's and his patrons' relationships with each other and in the California area in order to give the work context. The San Francisco Art Committee

was created in 1931 and was lead by Gerstle and this served Rivera well because they had been allies for years.²³⁵ Some artists felt that Rivera was receiving special treatment. For example, Gerstle and Pflueger asked for submissions for the Stock Exchange project from artists, even though it was clear Rivera already had the job.²³⁶ According to Lee's assessments, this was done late in the process and it was an attempt to quiet criticism. He discusses the motives of his patrons in California, for example when Rivera and the patrons began talking in 1926 about him coming to the United States when President Calles was in power in Mexico. This complicated matters because Calles was not only a supporter of the Bolsheviks in Russia, he was not very enthusiastic about U.S. financial involvement in Mexico, something Ambassador Dwight Morrow tried to change.²³⁷ Soon these patrons came to understand the power of public art to change the public's mind. Bender had a big hand in building up the art collection at the museum at Mills College in Oakland, donating most of the work he owned.²³⁸ He also points out that California School of Fine Art was the center for mural training in the state at the time.²³⁹ Lee gives a lot of credit to Gerstle, Pflueger and Bender for changing the game in the bay art scene.²⁴⁰ Rivera was of course a part of this change and would have a substantial influence in the area that continues to the present day.

Lee does point out that it was not altruism; some of the alliances made between Rivera patrons and others were made based on the exchange of political favors. Albert Bender was able to provide Dwight Morrow with art exhibitions that would then promote his cultural exchange policies with Mexico. And Morrow later helped Bender when he needed to get Rivera a work visa to come to the United States.²⁴¹ According to Lee, Morrow was aware that the Mexican Communist Party would not be in favor of Rivera

getting the commission at the chapel at the *Universidad Autónoma Chapingo*.²⁴² This is because the party was very critical of commissions from United States entities.

In discussing the public audience for *The Making of a Fresco*, Lee also recounts that the original commission was at the California School of Fine Arts before the plans changed and Rivera was offered the Pacific Stock Exchange building. Therefore the commission went “from an academic to a commercial space...”²⁴³ Rivera’s one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York exhibited mostly his “indigenous” pieces, like the ones he gave to Bender and Gerstle before the commissions. The show also exhibited *Frozen Assets*. The work was intended and is read as a direct criticism of the American capitalist system.²⁴⁴ Rivera used these sorts of commissions to begin a dialog a wide audience. He did not see it as limiting or propaganda, instead he saw it as an opportunity to reach a larger audience.

In his book, Lee quotes Rivera from *Creative Arts* about his wanting to be a “workman among workmen,”²⁴⁵ which shows his understanding of this aspect of Rivera. And indeed Lee chronicles Rivera’s influence on the local mural scene, which was quite strong for the artists Victor Arnautoff and Bernard Zakheim who worked with him. “It should come as no surprise that the painters most responsive to the implicitly radical quality of Rivera’s work were Arnautoff and Zakheim”²⁴⁶ because both were very political and were involved in civil wars in their home countries. He did help them, but again, this is another example of Rivera’s tendency towards building an artist community.

Lee describes the reception that *The Making of a Fresco* and Rivera received in the California art scene. He gives examples of prominent people who changed their stance on Rivera’s working in the Bay Area, such as Beatrice Ryan who was the first

gallerist to show Rivera's work in San Francisco. She was later quoted as saying Rivera was not supportive of the local art scene.²⁴⁷ Lee discusses how *The Making of a Fresco* was a platform for Rivera to reassert himself as an activist. “[*The Making of a Fresco*] separated Rivera from the new patrons, turning him back into a radical painter and putting him on the side of the disenfranchised San Franciscans who stood before that high wall.”²⁴⁸ However, this was not totally understood. Lee states that the working class in general also misread his work and therefore his politics because of their own bias, seeing Rivera as soft.²⁴⁹ This is one of several examples of how pundits were unable to pigeonhole Rivera. He was too left for the right and too right for the left.

Comparing the two murals, Lee makes the point that *Allegory of California* was not devoid of a political message as has been suggested. “Allegory was painted in a space epitomizing a corporate capitalist economy, but the topic it broached was just how far the power of that economy extended.”²⁵⁰ With that project, Rivera was presenting the ways in which agriculture was run by capitalists. And like *The Making of a Fresco*, *Allegory* created a controversy and received its share of criticism. “The insistence that the mural's significance was plain suggests that it was precisely the reverse. The hunt for iconography petered out, and the focus shifted back to the decorative.”²⁵¹ Lee points out that, like they would do with *The Making of a Fresco* later, the critics did not read the symbolism. The tree stump represented a clear-cut forest, and was not simply a stump.²⁵² And also like *The Making of a Fresco*, the reviews of *Allegory* were reduced to what he describes as “piecemeal identifications.”²⁵³ Lee reconciles this misreading by explaining that Rivera's visual language was not the same as what the American audience was used to.

The mural simply surpassed the categories of looking and writing available in the city; it did not qualify as a decorative piece and did not accord with the decorative aesthetic, championed by the most vocal mural painters, that was coalescing now into a distinct regional attitude.²⁵⁴

Throughout his research Lee appears to be interested in this binary categorization of decorative and non-decorative. He insists that before Rivera arrived, the Bay Area's public art existed simply for a functional purpose almost devoid of any social message. Lee also points out that the commissioners declared *The Making of a Fresco* a public artwork from its inception.²⁵⁵ This is one reason why it was so heavily discussed in the press.

Lee's major theme in his book is the relationships between public art and the various labor organizations active at that time. He explains thoroughly that labor organizations also took issue with Rivera and did not fully embrace him, for instance the San Francisco Labor Council had "anti-communist and racist sentiments" and argued that Rivera as a threat to the job market, despite Rivera's attempts to discuss the manual laborers in the United States.²⁵⁶ Lee reminds us that the workman in *The Making of a Fresco* was the "...first image for and about organized labor."²⁵⁷ Many critics, such as Rudolf Hess in *Creative Art* who I discussed earlier, thought political art did not have a place in murals, and instead, canvases were more appropriate.²⁵⁸ For Lee, most of the harsh judgments were a roundabout way to take issue with Rivera's ethnicity and political alliances.

He was called a political propagandist, not a painter. He was said to produce a false picture of Mexico as idyllically pre-Columbian, not a true picture of it as desperately poor. His zealous nationalism was off-putting, his leftist politics obtrusive, his interest in class imagery unsuited to mural work in a city purportedly without class divisions. His ethnic heritage was doubly

problematic. If he was Mexican, he was also unlike most of his countrymen in the city, for he championed rather than downplayed ethnic difference.²⁵⁹

It was not only Rivera who took heat, but his patrons as well. According to Lee, a surge in regionalism is the direct result of perceived threat. These artists attacked the commissioners by doing such things as drawing a poster of Pflueger as Czar.²⁶⁰ This type of criticism could be compared to the French salons of the nineteenth-century.²⁶¹ In his writing, Lee paints Gerstle as being supportive but also aware of the bad press and trying to dodge it. For instance, Lee describes that Gerstle appointed Rivera as a juror for a student show, making him take the heat off the administration by being a brief target for criticism.²⁶² Overall, for Lee, Rivera's influence was viewed as positive more than negative in the end. Rivera created a debate about public murals when he left. Some wanted him and his influence out of the mural movement, and, in contrast, others who wanted a leftist program saw him as a mentor.

While there is one administrative body that controls the access to *The Making of a Fresco* we can deduce how the mural is understood by the way in which it is treated, and at times mistreated. One should also keep in mind that the school's administration is in control of most of documented history of the mural, and, thus, its story is limited. Still, the fact that so much discussion and commotion regarding the mural occurred so often, within just a few years, shows that the mural is an active participant in the life of and the use of the gallery, and the San Francisco Art Institute itself. The oscillation between covering and uncovering, vandalizing and preserving, celebrating and hiding, shows that this is not passive object, but one which has been both extolled and scorned. This is very different from the quiet reception when first unveiled, as discussed in previous chapters.

In this sense, the mural is successful in creating a dialog about the role of art making and

labor in society by being an active participant in that discussion. Rivera wanted to create something moving, and the turbulent eighty year's history of the mural show that he did just that.

Conclusion

In the student gallery of the San Francisco Art Institute Diego Rivera accomplished a fresco that communicates the philosophy that art and manual labor are comparable in their shaping human history. This is done in many ways, one of the most important being the iconography used, which includes images of different vocations, classes, industry, arts, and real living figures in close proximity to each other. Rivera also accomplished this by using visual languages that are not commonly used simultaneously including but not limited to baroque, classical, Cubist, and Renaissance in order to make it apparent as a piece of art, making it self-referential, and the viewer is aware of themselves and their relationship to it. Many other parts of the mural do this as well, including portraits of real people, the artist, the fresco-making process, and the title, announcing that it is a mural and its topic.

The Making of a Fresco uses elements that other artists have used before. For instance, Rivera utilizes a grid composition similar to Mondrian's version in order to evoke Constructionism and Universality, an attempt at communicating to an audience of many classes. While Clement Greenberg argued that the Modern was so because it was self-aware, he was unconcerned with the audience or how artworks could be viewed differently by different viewers. I show that Rivera's work, in contrast to this argument, is a dialog particularly because it is self-referential. It asks the viewer to see it as art and deconstruct it as such. Using visual puns, Rivera evoked satire in his self-portrait in order to poke fun at his patrons in a lighthearted way, such as Goya and Heartfield did with their work. Further, I point out that the men and the woman he chose to depict in his

mural also lived the philosophy that artwork is a dialog with the public and the artist. This is the case with Pflueger, as well as Barrows, Wight, and Goodman.

I discussed Rivera's allusions to the freemasons and that he agreed with their philosophy of manual work being art, high value of the sciences, and their non-hierarchical secular culture. The heavy emphasis on the scaffold also puts a lot of importance on the idea of production, whether a building or a mural. By placing the workers and the artist together, Rivera is dismantling the hierarchy of art making that is prevalent in modern industrialized nations such as the United States. Scholars such as Anthony Lee and Alicia Azuela understood this, and argued it in their writings on Rivera.

When one looks at the history of commission of *The Making of a Fresco*, it is clear that Rivera's presence in the U.S. was polarizing. His patrons wanted him to work in the United States and networked with politicians to secure him a visa for entry. They did their best to promote him positively in the press but there were still unfavorable views of Rivera as an artist, as can be seen by public statements by artists Dixon and Maynard, and in such publications as *Creative Arts*, *The San Francisco Examiner*, *The San Francisco Bulletin*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and *The Argus*. I presented these reviews to show that these journals used personal attacks, empty discussions of the mural, and meaningless anecdotes to prove their point that Rivera was dangerous and unimportant at the same time, which indicates that he was neither. For some his success and influence was a marker of his danger. Instead Rivera was highly influential to California muralists, as Anthony Lee accounts for in his book, and had a positive and lasting effect on the artistic community in the United States. In the end, the attempts by the media to silence Rivera were unsuccessful.

There have been multiple readings of *The Making of a Fresco*, and in discussing what could be seen as Rivera's intention, I present one way of interpreting the work. By looking at the formal aspects of the mural, its reception, and history, one is able to describe what the mural does, what action it takes on the viewer and the space that surrounds it. While this was probably intentional on Rivera's part, this mural relies on viewers and history to shape its meaning and it does so by being such a liminal work that begs to be interpreted over and over again. Somewhere between being propaganda for hire and simply spouting his own agenda, there is a large gray area in which we find Diego Rivera.

¹ Bertram Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 293.

² Bertram Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*, (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000) and Stanton L. Catlin ed., *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective* (Detroit: Detroit Institute of the Arts, 1986).

³ The colors I am using to describe the mural come from my own observations in front of the work. It is possible to get different interpretations with different reproductions.

⁴ Bertram Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*, 291.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁶ Patrick Marnham, *Dreaming With His Eyes Open: A Life of Diego Rivera* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 234.

⁷ Laurence Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 115.

⁸ Stanton Catlin, *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective*, 284.

⁹ Bertram Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*, 291.

¹⁰ Laurence Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States*, 121.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 102

¹² Stanton Catlin, *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective*, 284.

¹³ Bertram Wolfe, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera*, 291.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, and Stanton Catlin, *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective*, 285.

¹⁵ Laurence Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States*, 122.

¹⁶ Stanton Catlin, *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective*, 334.

¹⁷ "Diego Rivera Mural," accessed January 8th, 2012, <http://www.sfai.edu/diego-rivera-mural/>.

¹⁸ Anthony Lee, *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco's Public Murals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 109.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 241.

²⁰ Laurence Hurlburt., *The Mexican Muralists in the United States*, 105.

²¹ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principle of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 1950), 18-23.

²² Ramón Favela, *Diego Rivera: The Cubist Years* (Phoenix: Phoenix Art Museum, 1984) 47.

²³ Meyer Schapiro, *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artists, and Society* (New York: George Braziller Inc., 1994), 7.

- ²⁴ Ernest Born (San Francisco architect), interviewed by Emmy Lou Packard, April 6, 1981, University of California Berkeley Environmental Design Archives, transcript from The Diego Rivera Archive, Rosenberg Library, City College of San Francisco, San Francisco CA.
- ²⁵ Anna Indych-López, *Diego Rivera: The Cubist Portraits 1913 – 1917* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2009), 146.
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- ⁸³ Ibid., 145. Indych-López quotes Ades in her book, *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820-1980*, page 172.
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architecture and all the variations between them, but we have not yet reached that sort of breadth of judgment in regard either to painting or sculpture. If painting and sculpture are to form a vital part of our architecture in the future it is just as necessary that the architect should arrive at that conception of painting and sculpture as allied to architecture..." Hoover Institution Archives, Bertram Wolfe Papers, Stanford University, Palo Alto CA.

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- ²⁴⁴ Ibid., 115.
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²⁶² Ibid., 90.

FIGURES



Figure 1: Diego Rivera, *The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City*, San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, California, Fresco mural, 1931

Photo by author



Figure 2: Diego Rivera, *The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City*, San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, California, Fresco mural, 1931

Image from artstor.org

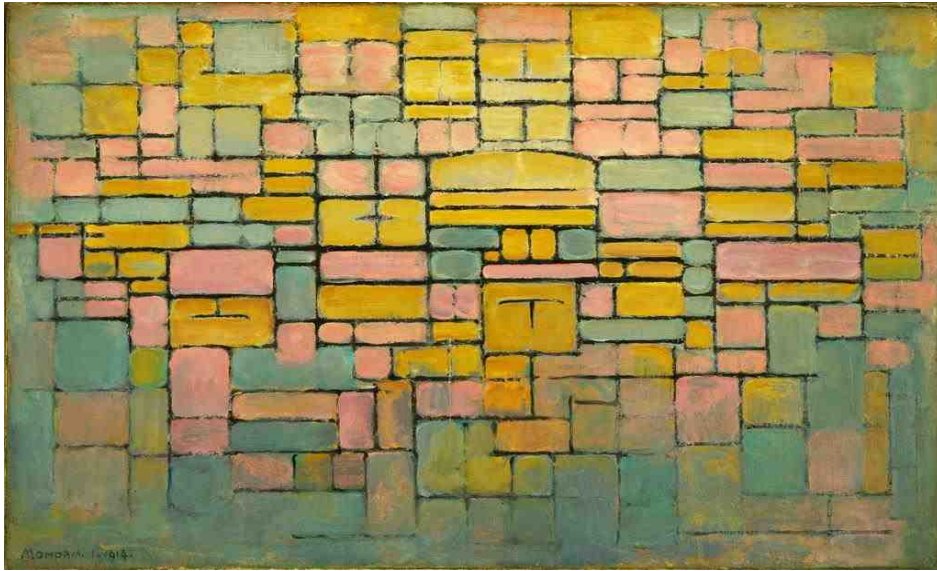


Figure 3: Piet Mondrian, *Tableau No. 2/ Composition No. V*, Oil on Canvas, 1914

Image from artstor.org



Figure 4: Piet Mondrian, *Composition in Brown and Gray (Gemälde no. II / Composition no. IX / Compositie 5)*, Oil on canvas, 1913

Image from artstor.org

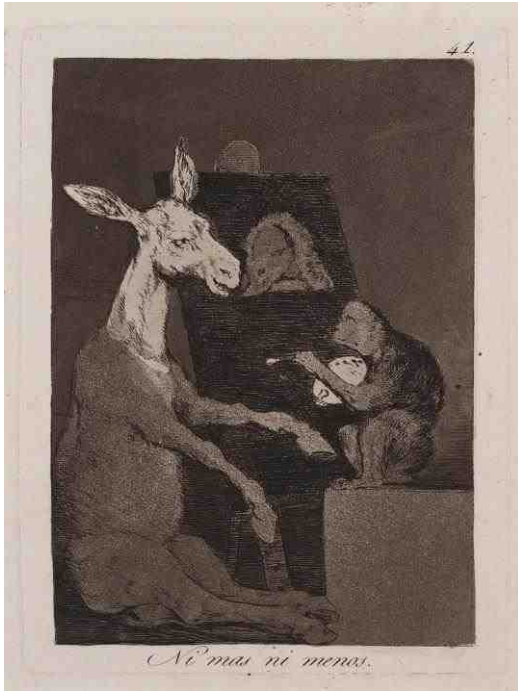


Figure 5: Francisco Goya, *Ni Mas Ni Menos*, Print etching, burnished aquatint, drypoint and burin printed in black on laid paper, 1799

**Image from Historic Deerfield Museum Consortium
<http://museums.fivecolleges.edu/>**

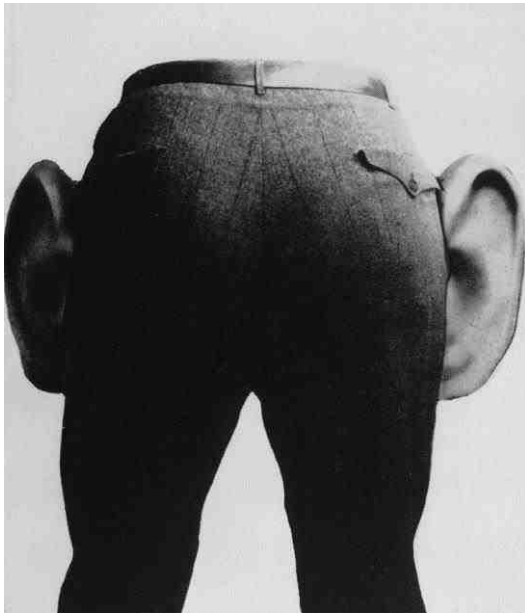


Figure 6: John Heartfield, *A Berlin saying: "A..... mit Ohren"*, photo montage, 1929

Image from artstor.org

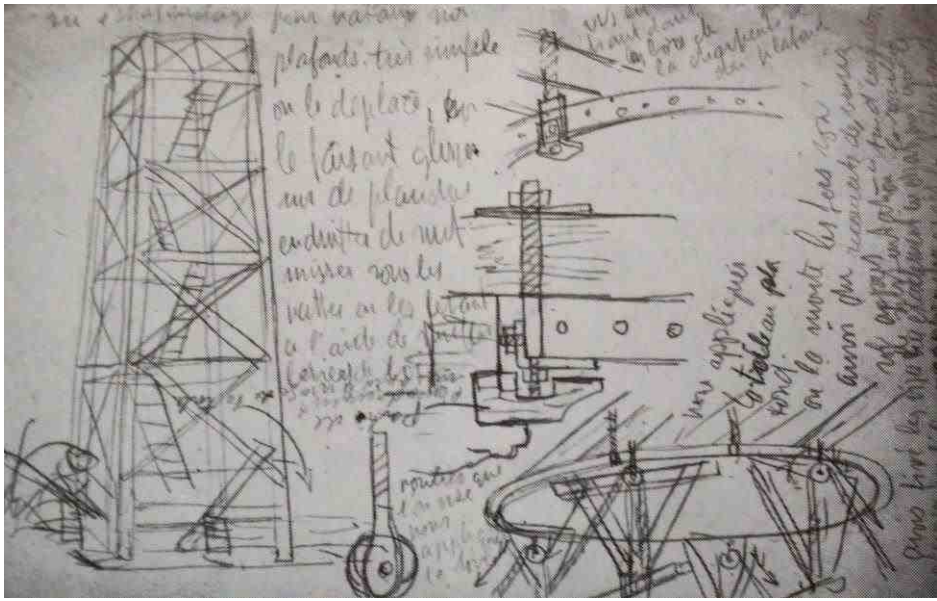


Figure 7: Diego Rivera, *Untitled* (page from sketchbook), pencil, 1920-21

Image from *Diego Rivera: A Retrospective*



Figure 8: Timothy Pflueger, *Scaffold for Calif. School of Fine Arts*, 1931

Photo by author and document in SFAI Library Archives



Figure 9: Diego Rivera, detail; *Mexico Today and Tomorrow*, The National Palace, Mexico City, Mexico, 1935.

Image from artstor.org

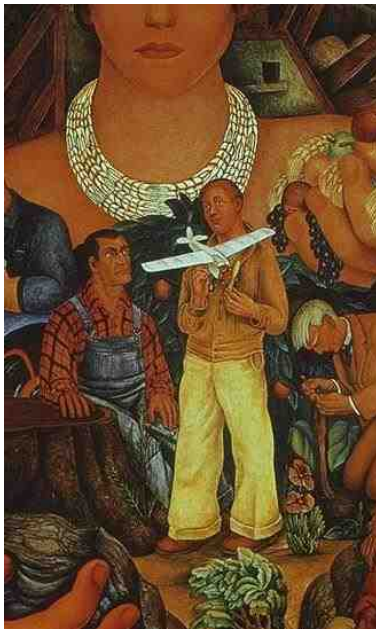


Figure 10: Diego Rivera, detail; *Allegory of California*, Fresco mural, City Club of San Francisco, San Francisco, California, 1931

Image from artstor.org



Figure 11: Spirit of St. Louis airplane

Image from Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum <http://www.nasm.si.edu/>



Figure 12: Diego Rivera, detail; *Detroit Industry Frescos*, Fresco mural, Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan, 1932-33

Photo by Shana Klein



Figure 13: Diego Rivera, detail, *Detroit Industry Frescos*, Fresco mural, Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan, 1932-33

Photo by Shana Klein



Figure 14: Ford Tri-Motor

Image from Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum <http://www.nasm.si.edu/>



Figure 15: Diego Rivera, *Sketch for Allegory of California*, Pencil, 1931

Image from artstor.org



Figure 16: Diego Rivera, *Untitled (mural for Stern residence)*, Fresco mural, UC Berkeley Campus, Berkeley, California, 1931

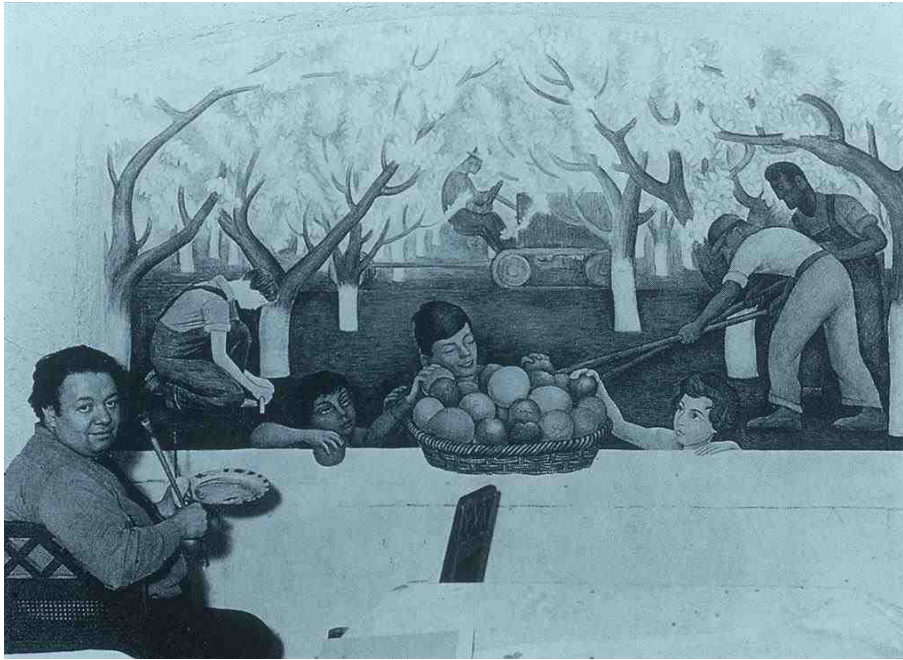


Figure 17: Diego Rivera in front of his mural at the Stern home, Photograph, 1931

Image from artstor.org

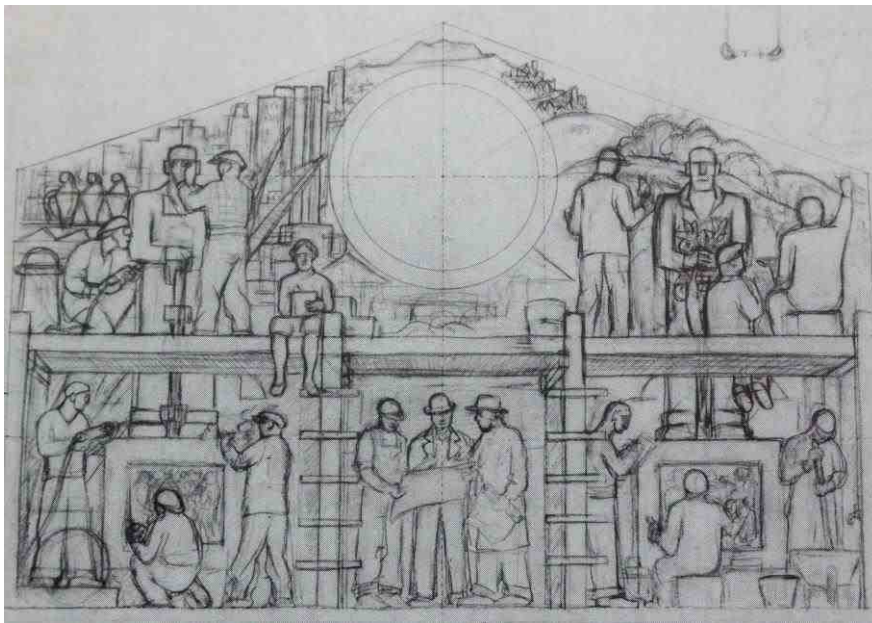


Figure 18: Diego Rivera, *Sketch for South Wall*, Pencil, 1931.

Image from Hurlburt, Laurence, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States*

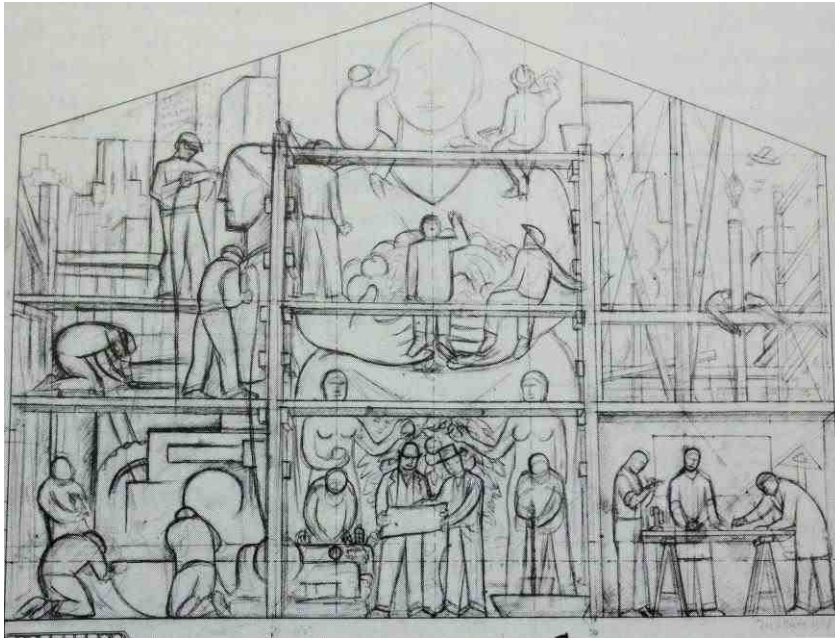


Figure 19: Diego Rivera, *Sketch for North Wall*, Pencil, 1931

Image from Hurlburt, Laurence, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States*

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